

CHAPTER 1

INVITATION TO SUICIDE

" GOOD morning, Bigglesworth. Come right in." Biggles's old chief, Air Commodore Raymond,

of Air Intelligence, rose from his desk with a smile, hand extended, to greet Squadron Leader James Bigglesworth, better known in the R.A.F.

as " Biggles of Biggles Squadron."

" I want you to meet Captain Rex Larrymore," he went on, indicating a small, keen-faced, sun-burned man whose most outstanding features were a head of close-clipped red hair, and bright, almost brilliant blue eyes. Their colour may have been emphasized by the hair, but Biggles thought he had never seen eyes so piercingly blue.

" Larrymore," continued the Air Commodore, " this is Squadron Leader Bigglesworth, the officer I told you about. If there is a man in the service capable of weighing up the pros and cons of your proposition it is he. In fact, I'll go as far as to say that if my opinion counts for anything, the final decision of the Air Council as to whether this enterprise should be undertaken or not will depend upon what he thinks. Take a seat, Bigglesworth, and I'll tell you what this is all about. Have a cigarette ? "

" Thanks." Biggles lit his cigarette and pulled up a chair.

" The story, briefly, is this," resumed the Air Commodore. " Captain Larrymore has come to us with an idea. As an idea it has much to recommend it, but as a practical proposition—well, presently I'll ask for

your opinion. I had better tell you right away that Larrymore was a pilot in the last war ; he still holds an ' A ' Licence, having until recently had a light plane of his own, so from the technical angle he knows what he is talking about. Apparently, some years ago he decided that the only interesting way to earn a living was to do something unusual. He became a prospector, specializing in gold and diamonds. He soon discovered, however, that all the territory within reasonable reach of civilization had been thoroughly combed, so he made up his mind to break new ground. This is usually a long and tedious way of working, so, as he was a pilot, it was not unnatural that his mind should turn to aeroplanes. In short, to reach places hitherto regarded as inaccessible to white men he determined to use a light aircraft. For a location he chose the big and wild island of Borneo. I will now ask Larrymore to carry on." The Air Commodore turned to his red-haired visitor. "Please continue."

Captain Larrymore stubbed his cigarette. "For a time," he began, looking at Biggles, "I didn't have much luck. My difficulty, as you will readily appreciate, was to find suitable landing-grounds. Eventually, however, I discovered one that suited my purpose admir-ably. It was in mountain country, near Mount Mulu, which runs up to eight

thousand feet.

My aerodrome is lower than that—at about four thousand. Mind you, this spot would not be everybody's choice. It is surrounded by a sixty-mile belt of sheer forest, real untamed jungle. Outside that, at the foot of the hills, there is a thirty-mile belt of bamboo swamp through which no white man has ever made his way. Indeed, as far as I know, no one has ever tried to get through it. I doubt if it's possible. Just as no one has ever been able to get in, no one could get out, so the chief worry with my landing-ground was this : if I had a crack-up, by landing badly on my aerodrome for instance, I should be there for good.

"The aerodrome—we'll call it that—is a queer place. On account of its altitude it is on the fringe of the moss forest. As perhaps you know, in Borneo, when you climb up out of the main jungle, you strike these amazing moss forests—the moss being due, I suppose, to the humidity and the heavy rainfall. My discovery of the landing ground was a fluke, and I'll tell you how it happened. One day my engine packed up. I thought I was for it.

The only place I could see where a crack-up was not absolutely inevitable was what I took to be a lake. To my amazement it was not a lake at all. It had been one, I think, but the water had gone, leaving a short bluish moss which from the air looks exactly like water."

"That seems queer," put in Biggles. "Why doesn't vegetation grow at this particular spot

? "

"Because there is practically no soil. It must have been washed away by the water. You'

re right on the bedrock. You can see the cracks where the water ran out—due, I imagine, to volcanic disturbance at some time."

Biggles nodded. "I see. Carry on."

"Well, I put my motor right, and then had a look round. It didn't take me long to discover that I'd had a wonderful stroke of luck. In places the cracks were full of silt, which I soon ascertained was diamondiferous gravel. I flew down to Brunei, in Sarawak, and loaded up with stores to last me for a month. Then I went back to my dry lake and started work."

"On your own ? " queried Biggles.

"Yes, absolutely by myself. I preferred to work alone."

" I see."

Captain Larrymore continued. "My first job was to clear up a really safe runway ; as you would expect, there were a number of rocks and old tree-trunks lying about. I don't know why I didn't think of natives, but I didn't. I hadn't seen a sign of any on my first landing.

On my second day, however, I looked up to find that I was being watched by as wild a gang of Punans—that's the tribe—as you could imagine. I was some way from my machine, so I thought it was all up. There's only one thing to do in a case like that.

Fighting is out of the question, so I strolled over to the wild men, casually, and saluted. It was a nasty moment."

Biggles grinned. " I'll bet it was."

Captain Larrymore nodded. "As it happened, my luck held. I spotted that one of them, a big fellow whom I took to be a chief, had an arm bandaged with a lot of dirty leaves. In dead silence I unwrapped it and had a look at the wound. My gosh ! You never saw such a mess as his arm was in. Someone had run a spear into it and it was a mass of pus. Still without speaking, I fetched the medical outfit I always carry and dressed the wound.

Well, that was that. My head didn't go into the tribal collection. These people aren't cannibals, but they're head-hunters in a big way. With them head-hunting is a sport—it occupies much the same position as football does here. Their favourite weapon is the sumpit—that's the Malay word for blowpipe. They carry a nice line in poisoned darts. I got the chief's arm well and we became good friends. Indeed, Suba—that's the chief's name—got his boys to help me with my work when I needed labour. That was two years ago. Now I'll come to the point.

"During the next two years I established a very snug little aerodrome. I built a house and a hangar out of Mipapalms, and generally made myself comfortable. Me and the Punans were like that." Captain Larrymore crossed his fingers. "I got to know most of them by name. There are about five hundred of them, and you can get an idea of how wild they are when I tell you that I was the first—in fact, the only white man they have ever seen."

"You were still on your own ? " interposed Biggles.

"You bet your life I was," declared Larrymore. " Prospectors don't share their secrets with anyone. I was finding some nice diamonds—nothing big, you understand, but useful

; and there was always a chance that any day I might make a real strike. Another thing I must tell you is this. Every time I flew down to Brunei for stores I brought back with me, in cans, more petrol and oil than I needed, and in that way I built up a useful dump against a rainy day. That's how things were when the war started in the Far East. Of course, I didn't know anything about the Japs landing in Borneo until I made one of my periodical trips to Brunei. I was nearly caught. In fact, I should have been if they hadn't fired at me, for I was just going to land. I guessed then what had happened. Back I went to my private aerodrome. I told Suba about it, but he wasn't particularly upset. There was no reason why he should be—he always imagined he was dead safe from outside interference. I wasn't so sure about it, so I loaded up to capacity with petrol, and with my parcel of diamonds in my pocket I flew across to Surabaya, in Java. I just had time to fill up again with petrol when the Japs landed there, so I pushed on to Australia. From there I came back to England. I got back last week."

"You've had an exciting time," murmured Biggles. "A bit too exciting," asserted Captain Larrymore. "Now I'll finish the yarn. On the way home I did a spot of thinking. Naturally, I kept in touch with what was happening, and my idea was born. It is this. There is, in the middle of Borneo, a ready-made aerodrome that the Japs don't know anything about. British aircraft operating from it could play the very devil with the Japs. I'm not thinking so much about shooting down their planes as shooting up their bases, ports and lines of communication. They wouldn't know where the deuce the machines were coming from, yet a bunch of sound pilots would be able to strike—from close range, that's the point—the very places that the Japs must consider absolutely safe.

Get the idea ? "

Biggles nodded. "Go on. This is most interesting."

"That's really all there is to it. Of course, the scheme would take a bit of organizing ; but if a squadron of machines, flown by pilots who were prepared to take a chance, could tuck themselves in at Lucky Strike—that's what I call my place—they would certainly be a thorn in

the side of the enemy. That's all. I came along to the Air Ministry with the idea for what it's worth. I was told to see Air Commodore Raymond, and he said he'd ask your opinion."

The Air Commodore pushed the cigarette box towards Biggles. There was a faint smile on his face as he asked, "Well, what do you think about it ? "

"What you really mean is, would I take a squadron out to this place ? " answered Biggles slowly.

"Why do you say that ? "

"Because if you hadn't already decided in your mind to do the job you wouldn't have sent for me," replied Biggles.

The Air Commodore smiled. "You're too shrewd, Bigglesworth. Well, I may as well admit it, you've hit the nail on the spot that drives it home. What about it ?

Biggles turned to Captain Larrymore. "I don't

know these Punans, I can't speak their' language, and I don't know the district. Would you, if I went out, be prepared to come along and effect the necessary introductions ?

"You bet I would," answered Larrymore promptly. "That was my idea. If you went on your own you

would probably get a poisoned arrow through your

gizzard or a spear in your back. I was lucky, but in

the ordinary way my friend Suba doesn't encourage visitors."

"You don't think he'll object to us barging in ? "

"Not if I'm with you. He'll do anything I say. Suba and his crowd of warriors might turn out to be useful allies in more ways than one. These tribesmen are at home. They know every tree in the forest, every valley, every hill and every game-track. In jungle country that's an enormous asset. The Japs couldn't get within miles of the place, even if they tried, without being seen. These Punans are real jungle folk. They have that wonderful knack of fading into the shadows without a sound. They are more silent than the wild creatures themselves. They're immune from fever. In the country I'm speaking

about, a hundred such men are worth a thousand regular troops."

"What about air reconnaissance ? You don't think the Japs would spot us if they flew over ? "

"Not a chance—unless machines were left standing in the open, which would be silly.

The Punans are experts at—I won't say camouflage, because that's a purely artificial device—I'd say protective colouration, which, with them, is instinctive, as it is with some animals. You couldn't see their village from fifty yards. They'll build us hangars and sheds so like the forest that you may find it hard to spot them, even knowing they are there."

" Good ! That certainly is most valuable. Naturally, everything would depend on not being spotted. What language do these people speak ? "

"A dialect of their own, but it's mostly Malay. You needn't worry about that. I'll act as interpreter."

Biggles turned to the Air Commodore. "I'd like to think about this, sir, with a chart in front of me. It would help me if I knew how far you are prepared to go."

"As far as you think necessary. You can have anything you want."

"Do you mean that—literally ? "

" Well--er--yes."

"I don't want any doubt about it, sir. Frankly, this proposition of dumping myself inside a ring of enemy armies and aerodromes looks like an invitation to suicide, although we might do a great deal of damage before we were found out and bumped off. Obviously, success is bound to depend largely on the efficiency of the aircraft used. Because you think—not without reason—that you'll never see the machines again, I'm not going to be palmed off with a lot of obsolete crates."

The Air Commodore stroked his chin reflectively. "Of course not."

"In organizing my outfit I should want to be certain that I should have at my disposal, without any haggling, not only the aircraft and equipment which I consider best suited for the job, but the closest co-

operation possible. This is an unorthodox operation. Its best chance of success is unorthodox methods, and I don't want the Air Ministry to say you mustn't do this' or,

we can't do that.' If I run the show I want to run it my way, and I may decide on unusual tactics. In short, sir, if the job is going to be done, it must be done properly; otherwise it would be a waste of time, personnel and machines."

"I quite agree. That's fair. If you take on the job, Bigglesworth, I'll give you my word that you shall have absolute carte blanche in the matter of equipment and outside co-operation."

Biggles nodded. "Very good, sir. I'll think it over." Biggles turned to Captain Larrymore.

"Where are you staying ? "

"At the Savoy."

"Any particular reason for wanting to be there ? " "None."

"Then how about coming back with me to my station ? We'll discuss the thing together.

In making my plans I shall need all the local data you can let me have. I'd also like you to meet my boys—the lads who will do the job."

"That suits me down to the ground," declared Captain Larrymore.

The Air Commodore looked at Biggles. "Are you going to tell your fellows about this ? "

Biggles thought for a moment. "Not yet. I shall have to take them into my confidence before the start, for one thing because I think it is essentially a show for volunteers, and secondly, they'll have to make special provision in the way of tropical kit. I shall tell Lacey—as you know, he's my senior Flight Commander—right away, because he's had nearly as much experience in these matters as I have, and I value his opinion."

"And when can I expect your report and recommendations ? "

"I ought to be able to manage it by to-morrow—or to-night, if you care to slip down. If you could afford the time I think it would be a very good thing if you came along and joined in the discussion. It would

save time in the long run. You would be able to say right away

whether we could, or could not, do this or that, or have such equipment as I may think desirable."

"I think that's an excellent idea," averred the Air Commodore after a glance at his engagement pad. "Are you going back right away ? "

" Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll come with you."

CHAPTER II

PLOTS AND PLANS

BIGGLES was silent most of the way to the aerodrome, and when, after dinner, he took the Air

Commodore, Captain Larrymore, and Flight Lieutenant 'Algy Lacey into his office, he had more or less decided on the broad outline of a plan. He gave Algy a resume of the project, and then went on :

"This seems to be a job for a small, compact, but heavily armed unit, with a big machine, a weight carrier, to maintain contact with the outside world and bring in supplies. All aircraft would have to be fast, capable of long-range interception and ground attack.

" That sounds like Beaufighters," murmured Algy.

"That, in fact, is the machine I had in mind," answered Biggles., "I think three should be enough. That would employ six officers. We should need others in reserve."

"Forgive me for butting in, but I'm a bit out of touch with things," put in Captain Larrymore. "What sort of machine is this Beaufighter ? "

Biggles answered : "The Beaufighter is a twinengined two-seater fighter—probably the most heavily armed fighter in the world. There are four cannon under the nose and six Browning machine-guns in the wings. There are more guns in the rear cockpit, which is a power-operated turret behind the pilot. The Beau was designed for heavy striking power, high diving speed and big loads. Four petrol tanks carry five hundred and fifty gallons of fuel, which gives the machine a range of fifteen hundred miles. Speed is rather more than three hundred and thirty miles an hour. Ceiling is around twenty-nine

thousand feet.

Entry is by hatch under the fuselage. There's also a special emergency escape hatch. It's a quiet aircraft, and lands slowly—of course there are air-brakes. It's fully equipped for any job it might be called on to do. There's an intercommunication telephone for pilot and gunner. The tail wheel retracts as well as the undercarriage."

"Sounds marvellous," murmured Larrymore.

"I should say it's the ideal aircraft for the job," asserted the Air Commodore. "The range is important. You could hit at the enemy in Thailand, Indo China, Malaya, the Philippines, Sumatra, Java—in fact, operating from a central base you could cover practically the whole of the Dutch East Indies."

"What about a communication machine ? " asked Algy.

"I think a Consolidated Liberator would suit us best," replied Biggles. "Again, we've got high speed, long range and a big load. With a range of three thousand miles a Liberator could keep us in touch with India, Ceylon or Australia—Port Darwin, Australia, would probably be the most convenient."

"The Liberator is a big four-engined job," muttered the Air Commodore. "Remember, you've got to get in and out of what is really an improvised aerodrome."

"It's got a tricycle undercarriage, which makes for easy landing, and the big Fowler air-brakes pull it up quickly," Biggles pointed out.

The Air Commodore nodded. "That's true. All right, let us say three Beaufighters and a Liberator."

"The Liberator will spend most of its time going to and fro between Lucky Strike aerodrome and Australia," resumed Biggles. "It will have to keep us going with everything—spares, petrol, oil and food—besides acting as a heavy bomber should we need one urgently." Biggles turned to Captain Larrymore. "How much petrol have you got stored at the aerodrome ? "

"I should think there must be nearly two thousand gallons."

"I'm afraid that won't last us long. Still, the Liberator, whatever else it brings, can always make up its disposable load with drums of petrol. Its load, speaking from memory, is about four thousand pounds

weight."

"If you ran short of fuel I could probably get some to you," the Air Commodore observed. "You won't use radio, of course ? "

"No, we daren't risk it—at least, not from the aerodrome. In the ordinary way the Liberator will have to carry despatches. I don't see why we shouldn't use radio in the air, though."

The Air Commodore looked dubious. "This Liberator is going to be your life-line," he remarked. "If it failed to get through one day you'd be in a mess."

"That's a risk we shall have to take, but it can be minimized to some extent by doing as much night flying as possible." Biggles lit a cigarette. "Well, sir, that's the scheme as I see it—a unit of three Beaufighters serviced by a Liberator. It might be a good thing to have another Beaufighter standing by at Darwin in case I lost one."

Air Commodore Raymond made a note in his book. "We can easily fix that. Now, what about personnel ? "

"I shall need all my regular officers. It will take six to operate the Beaufighters, and two the Liberator. That leaves two in reserve. When they are not required on the island they can man the guns of the Liberator. Six really efficient mechanics under Smyth, my old flight sergeant, should be enough for the ground team. I don't know how we shall go for sickness—there's almost bound to be some, I imagine." Biggles turned again to Captain Larrymore. "How's the malaria ? "

"Not too bad," answered Larrymore. "We're up pretty high, you know, and you don't get many mosquitoes above three thousand feet. Still, it's a wise precaution to take quinine regularly."

"I see. It's as well to know these things. All these details will have to be settled before we start."

The Air Commodore sat back. "That seems to be everything. How long before you can get away, Bigglesworth ? "

"You'd better give me a week, sir."

"Which way will you go out ? "

"The four machines could fly out together. The Liberator is as fast—

slightly faster, in fact, than the Beaufighters. We ought to be able to do the trip in three hops—Middle East, India or Ceylon, and then Borneo. To keep out of trouble crossing Europe I should make that part of the journey after dark."

The Air Commodore stood up. " Good ! I'll get busy, working on the assumption that you will leave England at, shall we say, sunset, one week from to-day ? "

" That's it, sir."

And so it came about that fourteen days later, after an uneventful journey, just as dawn was breaking, three Beaufighters and a Liberator glided down into the unknown heart of the Japanese-occupied island of Borneo.

All the machines were painted green, the Beau-fighters carrying distinguishing marks in the form of one, two and three red bands round the respective fuselages. The arrangement of the crews was to be, subject to the vicissitudes of war, a permanent one.

In the leading machine was Biggles, with Flying Officer Ginger Hebblethwaite as spare pilot and gunner. The machine with two red bands was flown by Flight Lieutenant Algy Lacey, with Flying Officer Tug Carrington for partner. The third Beaufighter, carrying three red bands, was flown by Flight Lieutenant Lord Bertie Lissie, with Flying Officer Tex O'Hara occupying the gunner's turret. Slightly below the protective curtain of Beaufighters was the Consolidated Liberator, with Flight Lieutenant Angus Mackail at the control column, chosen for the job because of his uncanny skill as a navigator. In the seat beside him, to guide the machine to its destination after Borneo was reached, was Captain Rex Larrymore, while manning the guns were the remaining members of Biggles's squadron who had done so well during the Battle of Britain—Flying Officers Taffy Hughes, Ferocity Ferris and Henry Harcourt, each the tried and trusted comrade of the others. In addition to its commissioned passengers the Liberator also carried the aircraftmen who had been selected by Biggles and Flight Sergeant Smyth for the difficult task ahead. The aircraft was loaded to capacity with food, tools, medical supplies and other portable equipment.

Suddenly, in accordance with a prearranged plan, the Liberator forged ahead, and, guided by Captain Larrymore, led the way through jungle-clad mountains towards what appeared to be a lake, but what was, in fact, Captain Larrymore's secret aerodrome.

One by one the machines landed and taxied behind the Liberator to the narrow end of the landing-ground. Here engines were stopped and the crews alighted, yawning and stretching their limbs after the long flight from India. Standing on a carpet of short, bluish-coloured moss, Ginger surveyed the scene: There was not a soul in sight. All was strangely quiet.

"Your friends seem to have departed, Rex," observed Biggles to Captain Larrymore.

"Don't you believe it," was the smiling answer. "There are a thousand eyes watching us from those innocent - looking palms, I'll warrant. Watch this." Cupping his hands round his mouth, Rex uttered a cry that sounded like " Ay-eesh, Ay-eesh ! "

Instantly the jungle came to life. There was a wild yell, and from it poured hundreds of brown men of such savage appearance that Bertie began moving towards his machine.

"Here, I say, old chappie, I don't like the looks of these pals of yours," he remarked nervously. "The blighters aren't even civilized—if you see what I mean."

"I reckon they're about as wild as they make 'em," answered Rex, laughing. "But you've nothing to worry about." He stepped forward, and in another minute was gripping the arms of one of the most magnificent savages Ginger had ever seen. He stood a full six feet four inches in height, with arms of proportionate size ; muscles rippled under the skin of a mighty brown torso —or what could be seen of it, for it was festooned with an amazing assortment of articles, from teeth and claws to empty cartridge cases and tin lids. Hanging from one ear, in the manner of an ear-ring, was a splendid ivory tusk. His head was crowned with a foot-high hat, not unlike an inverted saucepan, decorated with brilliantly coloured feathers cleverly interwoven. Rings of brass and copper wire encircled his wrists and ankles. His only garment was a short Malay sarong.

Rex brought him forward. "Meet Suba, the mighty hunter," he cried.

Introductions were effected, Suba nodding with savage dignity.

You had better tell him why we've come, Rex," suggested Biggles.

Rex addressed the chief for some minutes in his own language. When he had finished the chief raised his right hand and said one word : "

Tabek."

"That means it's okay," declared Rex. "Tabek is a greeting only used between friends."

"That's fine," said Biggles. "Now we had better get busy in case a Japanese plane should come over."

For the rest of the day Lucky Strike aerodrome was a scene of almost frantic activity.

Rex distributed some presents, after which the Punans went to work with a will. Five hundred pairs of hands made rapid progress in the work of erecting four hangars just inside the fringe of the moss forest. They were constructed out of the mighty forty-foot fronds of Mipas palms, beautifully arranged so that the rain, when it came, would be shot off. Living quarters were constructed for officers and airmen, and temporary store-houses were run up to accommodate the stores as fast as they were unloaded from the machines. Biggles selected the spots where the buildings were to be erected, while Rex spent most of the day talking with the chief and his senior warriors, describing as well as he could what was happening in the world, the progress that had already been made by the yellow invaders from Japan, and how the British airmen, with their aeroplanes, hoped to hamper their efforts—with all of which Suba was in full agreement. He had the intelligence to realize that even he in his remote retreat might one day be invaded if the Japanese tide of conquest was not stopped.

At sunset Biggles made a tour of inspection. He had good reason to be satisfied, for everything was snugly housed, and there was nothing to indicate that a squadron of aircraft was installed in the heart of enemy-occupied territory. At the finish he called all ranks into the long bungalow that was to serve as a mess-room, and was now lit by a hurricane lamp, to take stock of the situation.

"Well," he said, "we're here. You all know why we have come. It is not to sit here and protect ourselves. It is to do as much mischief to the enemy as we can. Don't set too much store on the fact that we are surrounded by what appears to be an impenetrable belt of jungle ; always remember that if things go wrong that same jungle may turn out to be a menace, a barrier that may keep us here for the duration, perhaps for the rest of our days. Obedience to orders will reduce the risks we are running. Officers will refrain from taking chances except when circumstances justify them. They will avoid air combat rather than seek it, for the success of this operation will be judged, not by

the number of enemy machines we shoot down, but by the damage we do without loss to ourselves. The enemy are in a position to replace casualties more easily than we are. I hope there will be no casualties. Hit and run—that must be our policy. The harder we hit and the better we run afterwards, the more likely shall we be to hit again another day. By striking at the bases where the enemy considers himself absolutely safe we may cause a tremendous amount of confusion. How long we last will depend to a great extent on the ground staff.

They will have to work unceasingly, for in a humid climate like this fabric rots very quickly, and metal

fittings rust. Don't fool about with the natives. If some of their customs strike you as funny, remember that yours are just as funny to them. We don't want any friction. Don't wander about in the forest—it's full of creeping, crawling things that bite and sting.

Everyone's first job is to keep fit. We've no medical officer, so if anyone falls sick it means transportation to Australia. Quinine will be issued daily against fever, and it's up to everyone to take it.

"I have in my pocket a number of objectives which the Higher Command is anxious to reconnoitre ; we shall take photographs of them—not very exciting work, perhaps, but in this way we may pick up information as to the disposal of enemy forces that will have greater results than perhaps some of you suppose. We are surrounded by thousands of islands, large and small, set in a tropic sea. Among these islands are enemy transports, aircraft carriers, submarines, invasion barges, and so on. We shall try to locate them. We shall also try to destroy them. We start work to-morrow. Mr. Mackail will proceed in the Liberator to Australia. His job will be to keep us going with stores, fuel, ammunition, bombs and other supplies. That's all. I advise everyone to get a good night's rest. Any questions ? "

"Are we allowed to use the jolly old radio ? " asked Bertie.

"That will be a matter of discretion," answered Biggles. "Obviously, we shall never transmit from this base, or from anywhere near it ; but since we can't operate without being seen, in which case the enemy will soon know that we're about, there is really no reason why we should deny ourselves radio facilities when there is no risk of giving anything away. There are bound to be times in the air when I shall want to speak to other machines—or perhaps some of you will wish to speak to me. It boils down to this ; Never use radio when there is a

chance of it giving away our position here."

"What is to be the first objective ? " inquired Ginger. "Before going to bed I should like to spend a little time on my maps, to get the general geography of the whole area fixed in my mind."

"I think a look round near home, to see what's about, is indicated," replied Biggles. " I shall take a camera. We'll head north-east for a start ; when we hit the coast of British North Borneo we'll follow the coast of Sarawak down to Kuching, the capital. We ought to find something there. Then we'll make a detour back home. I don't want anybody, ever, to fly straight home, particularly if he is being followed. That's all. All machines will leave the ground an hour before dawn."

CHAPTER III

DAWN PATROL

THE sky was still brilliantly spangled with stars when, the following morning, the Liberator took

off on its long journey to Darwin, Australia, taking with it, as gunners, Ferocity Ferris and Henry Harcourt. The three Beaufighters followed it into the air soon afterwards, but swung round on a different course, leaving Taffy Hughes and Captain Larrymore in charge of the base.

As Biggles climbed, Ginger looked down with curious interest on one of the last remaining strongholds of truly virgin jungle. It stretched away on all sides, to fade at last into mysterious shadows. Mist filled the valleys. Through it rose the black precipitous mass of Mount Mulu and other lofty peaks, unnamed, 'unknown, unmarked on the map. Moving through the air as he was, in the fastest and most scientific vehicle that human ingenuity had been able to devise, it was not easy to believe that a few thousand feet away, crouching in their lairs, were some of the wildest and strangest creatures left on earth ; that the forest at which he now gazed was the home of the great ape called orang-outang, elephants, pigmy rhinoceros, leopards, buffalo, enormous pythons, flying squirrels, the weird scaly monster called pangolin, poisonous centipedes and blood-sucking insects by the million. In the forest, too, flourished the strangest of all flowers, the Rafflesia, with flowers eight feet across, stinking of death and corruption.

Ginger shuddered at the thought of a forced landing.

The machines, in loose formation, roared on through the lonely sky, always climbing, until after twenty minutes' flight, far ahead the sea could be seen shimmering to the stars.

Reaching the coast, Biggles turned to follow it, while Ginger studied sea and land for signs of enemy occupation. For a long time, while the tropic dawn broke in a blaze of colour inconceivable to those who have never seen it, he saw nothing—that is, no sign of life or movement. Then a curious little drama came into view, although at first it was not apparent as such. The sea was flat calm. Across it, like scars, were two long wakes, the wakes of small vessels. Both were on the same course, one far behind the other. The leading one appeared to be a small native craft, perhaps a fishing-boat, little larger than a sailing dinghy. The boat behind, rapidly overtaking it, was also small, but it carried no sail. Its creamy wake made it clear that it was fitted with a high-powered engine.

And while Ginger watched, without particular interest, he saw something that gave him cause to wonder. A flash of flame, followed by a puff of smoke, spurted from the rear vessel. A minute or two later water splashed into the air beside the sailing-boat.

Ginger spoke to Biggles on the inter-communication telephone. "Take a look below.

Something seems to be going on."

"What's happening ? " asked Biggles.

"The power-boat is shooting at the sailing-boatlook, there it goes again. What do you make of it ? "

"I think we'll go down and have a dekko. I'll tell the other machines to circle for a while."

The nose of the Beaufighter went down- in a steep dive.

Ginger, watching the two vessels below, saw the power-boat swerve suddenly and race towards the land.

" Ah-ha ! " he said, "he doesn't like the look of us. I fancy we've caught a Jap at his dirty work."

Biggles did not answer. He took the Beaufighter down to a couple of hundred feet over the sailing vessel, and circled. White faces looked up. Arms waved a greeting.

Biggles's voice, when he spoke to Ginger, was excited. "By gosh ! They're Europeans ! "

Swinging round, he raced after the motor-boat, now well on its way to the shore. It did not need the Japanese flags in the stern to reveal its nationality. A burst of machine-gun fire spoke even more plainly.

"They seem inclined to argue," muttered Biggles on the telephone. "That suits me fine."

And as he spoke he brought his full armament to bear.

The motor-boat seemed to disappear under a cloud of spray. Biggles held his fire until he was within two hundred feet, and then zoomed high.

"That ought to be enough," he remarked. "We can't afford to waste ammunition."

His opinion proved to be correct. By the time the Beaufighter had turned the motor-boat was awash, fast settling down. In another minute it had disappeared beneath the tranquil sea, leaving half a dozen figures splashing on the surface.

"I think we can safely leave the rest to the sharks," said Biggles imperturbably. "We can't do any rescue work, anyway."

"What about the people in the sailing dinghy ? " asked Ginger.

"Not being able to land on water we can't do anything about them, either. They're probably refugees from the Philippines. There must be many on these islands."

"Seems awful to leave them."

"It would have been worse for them if we hadn't arrived when we did," Biggles pointed out. "They've probably got some plan in mind. By sinking the motorboat that was pursuing them we have at least given them a fresh start."

Biggles flew back to the little sailing craft and circled it twice. There were three people on it, but, as he had said, there was nothing he could do, so he climbed back up to where the other two Beaufighters were waiting, and continued the patrol.

The sun was now well above the horizon, and land and sea were

revealed in all their primitive loneliness. Biggles continued to follow the coast, now running in a south-Westerly direction. There were a few boats in Brunei harbour, of which Ginger made careful note, but there was no aerial opposition. The three Beau-fighters sped on under a serene blue sky, and twenty minutes elapsed before Ginger had occasion to speak again.

"Tally-ho ! " he called. "Aircraft on the port bow, about five thousand feet below us.

Looks like a Mitsubishi, but I'm not sure."

"It's a Mitsubishi Navy B.96, single-seat fighter," muttered Biggles. "That's a ship-plane, which means that there must be an aircraft carrier about somewhere. Keep an eye open for it ; it's probably in Kuching harbour. We're just coming to it. Ah I The Jap has spotted us."

The Mitsubishi came a little nearer for a closer look, then turned and dived away steeply.

"He doesn't like the look of us," muttered Ginger, in a disappointed voice.

"You can't blame him for that," returned Biggles. "Yes, he's making for Kuching all right. No doubt he aims to tell his folks that we're about. I think I'd like to convey that information myself."

As he spoke Biggles put the Beaufighter in a dive, not too steep, but enough to send the speed indicator soaring. Kuching came into view on the far side of a wide bay.

"There's the carrier!" shouted Ginger suddenly. "It's at anchor. By thunder ! Do you see what I see ? They've got all the machines lined up on deck for an inspection—at least that's what it looks like."

"Let's see if we can upset the party," suggested Biggles. Then he spoke to the others over the radio. " Algy, tackle the aerodrome ; knock it about all you can. Bertie, stick around and deal with any opposition. Count the warships in the harbour, and anything else worth noting. Here we go." Biggles steepened his

dive, and the Beaufighter went down like a thunderbolt towards the aircraft carrier.

Ginger had done so much air fighting that it took a good deal to excite

him, but the sight of the enemy aircraft carrier, with forty or fifty machines parked on its flying-deck, filled him with a fierce exultation. It was the sort of target every airman hopes to find, but seldom does. That the Japanese, believing themselves safe, had been caught napping was proved at once by the fact that, although the Beaufighters were now down to five thousand feet, there was no sign of anti-aircraft gunfire ; and when it came the shooting was wild.

Twisting and turning like a snipe, Biggles plunged down at the great vessel that lay like a basking whale on the limpid waters of the harbour. Down—down—he roared, with the earth and the sea with its many craft in some magical way seeming to float up to meet him. Not until he was within a few hundred feet of the water did he begin to pull out, in line with the length of the carrier, and as his nose came level with the flying-deck his guns blazed. The Beaufighter quivered under the recoil of its four cannon and six machine-guns. Tracer bullets streaked like sparks of white fire, and the blazing balls that marked the trajectory of cannon shells followed them to the target. The full blast struck the closely packed aircraft at one end, and the result was as if a hurricane had hit them.

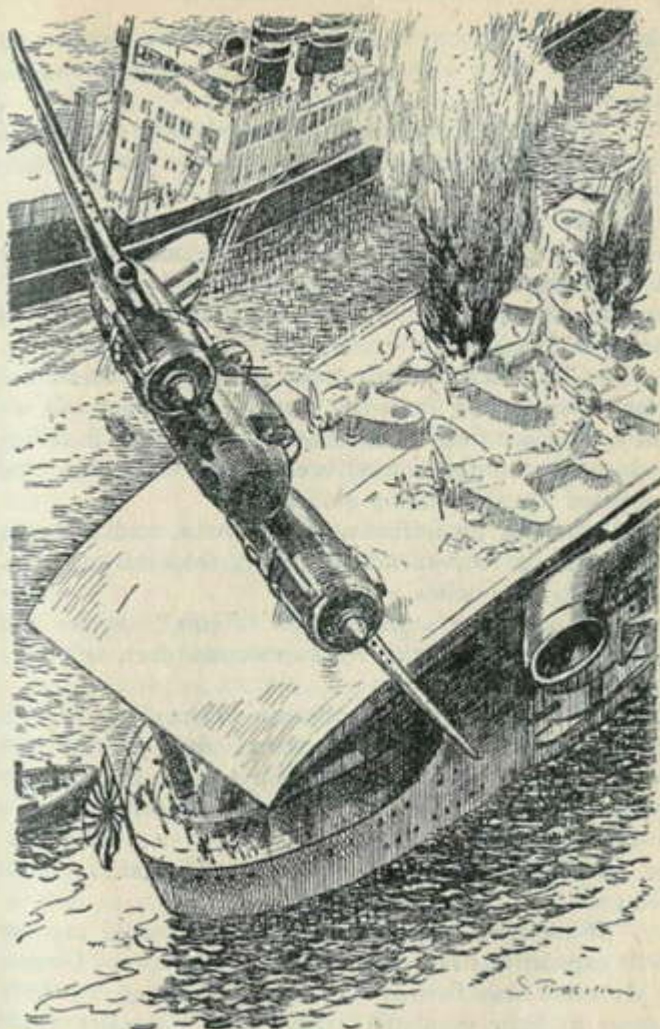
Lifting his nose a fraction, Biggles carved a path of flying splinters the full length of the ship, and then, zooming, banked steeply so that Ginger could bring his guns to bear.

This was the moment for which Ginger had waited, and his heart beat a triumphant tattoo as his bullets added to the work of destruction. Flame-shot smoke leapt up in several places. He could see fire running about the deck, and knew that at least one petrol tank had burst. Men were running and jumping among the flames.

"That's all ! " shouted Biggles, and raced on through the flak that was now mottling the blue with its ugly black plumes.

"Just one more dive," pleaded Ginger.

No ! It isn't necessary. Half the machines are on fire already, and they'll never move the others." Biggles tore on out of range of the guns, calling to Algy and Bertie to follow



Flame-shot smoke leapt up in several places.

3

him.

Looking back, Ginger could see a great column of black smoke rising from the carrier.

And that was not the only place from which smoke was rising. Buildings were alight around a level area on the shore which he supposed was the landing-ground.

Bertie took up formation from above, and presently Algy, with a strip of fabric trailing from his wing-tip, soared up from below.

"I must have a photograph of this," Biggles told Ginger, and climbing up to ten thousand feet, he took a number of shots.

By this time several aircraft were in the air, so Biggles, deciding that it was a case where discretion was the better part of valour, headed away to the south, easily outstripping the Japanese machines that were making a half-hearted attempt to follow.

"I think they'll remember our visit," said Biggles to Ginger.

"If we never do anything more, I should say our little expedition has been worth while,"

observed Ginger. "We must have destroyed or damaged twenty or thirty planes at least on that carrier. They'll wonder where the deuce we came from."

"That's what I want them to wonder, and I aim to

keep them wondering," answered Biggles, and turned Inland over the jungle.

"Going home ? " inquired Ginger.

"Yes. We've done a useful morning's work, and there's no sense in overdoing it. Algy has got a wing damaged. We'd better get back."

Biggles altered course several times on the return journey in order to confuse watchers on the ground, for to fly straight would mean leaving a definite track. The mist, Ginger noticed, had gone from the valleys, and the peak of Mount Mulu, a useful landmark, rose up like a blue tooth on the horizon.

Twenty minutes later, with Lucky Strike aerodrome in view, Biggles gave the order for independent landing, and one by one the Beaufighters glided down to their nests.

Algy's machine, it was ascertained, was not badly damaged, and the ground crew were soon at work on it.

"How did it go ? " asked Taffy.

"Come in the mess and I'll tell you about it," answered Biggles, handing his camera to Flight Sergeant Smyth, "Everyone make out his

combat report While the show is fresh in mind. Then, I think, a spot of breakfast is indicated."

A check-up revealed that the show had been more successful than Ginger had supposed.

Algy had set fire to several machines standing on the aerodrome as well as shot up the hangars. He had also sprayed a parade ground where a number of Japanese soldiers had assembled. Bertie had shot down a flying-boat which had been unlucky enough to arrive while the attack was in progress. As he put it : "The jolly old pilot seemed to be all at sea, as if he couldn't make out what was happening—if you get my meaning ? The silly ass didn't wonder long. I hit him a crack amidships and he fell on the pier."

"Did anyone count the warships ? " asked Biggles. "I made out two beastly destroyers, a gunboat and two transports;" said Bertie.

"That's what I thought," replied Biggles. "The photographs should give us confirmation.

Well, considering that I only intended to have a look round, to get our bearings, we've made a good start. At any rate, we've let the Japs know we're about. Apart from the damage we've done, our sudden arrival at a place so remote from a British base will probably upset all their calculations. The commander-in-chief must be very worried, wondering if and when the same sort of thing is going to happen again."

Rex Larrymore grinned. "When ii it going to happen again ? "

"To-morrow, I hope," answered Biggles. "There are several places that should provide us with plenty of meat.. I'm sorry we couldn't do anything for those fellows in the sailing-boat."

"That reminds me," put in Ginger. "I've got a suggestion to make. It occurred to me on the way home."

"Let's have it," invited Biggles.

"It struck me as a pity that we couldn't drop something to the fellows in the boat — I mean food in particular. Don't you think it would be a good idea for each machine to carry what we might call an emergency box, containing iron rations, medical supplies and so on ? Then, if one of us had to make a forced landing, the others could drop their boxes as well, so that the people on the ground would have a supply to go

on with —

enough to keep them alive until they could be rescued. in the same way, if we saw any white folks on the ground —and there must be quite a number who have escaped, or who are trying to escape from the Japanese—we could be really helpful."

Biggles nodded. "That's a good idea," he agreed. "You might see about it right away."

CHAPTER IV

THE WAR-DRUMS SPEAK

THE following day, splitting his force to obtain quick results for the Higher Command, Biggles obtained

photographs of Singapore, Algy confirmed the damage at Kuching, while Bertie made a reconnaissance over Surabaya, in Java. All three machines returned safely, without combat, which caused Biggles to remark that most of the front line aircraft were probably in the more active theatres of war—China, Burma and Timor. If the presence of the British squadron resulted in some of these machines being recalled, so well and good.

He also stated that he intended to wait for the Liberator to return before undertaking further operations, in the first place because he did not want to run the petrol supply too low, and secondly, he thought it was likely that the Liberator would bring special instructions.

"Now the Higher Command knows we are here you can be pretty sure they'll start asking us to do things," he remarked.

"Too true, old warrior, too true," murmured Bertie sadly.

"Still, that's what we're here for," Biggles pointed out.

Later in the day, hearing laughter, Ginger strolled over to the native village to find Tug Carrington, with Rex Larrymore acting as interpreter, giving several warriors lessons in the art of boxing, which was to them something entirely new. Most of the village had turned out to watch. There were cries of delight and amazement as time and time again a warrior would strike—none too gently—at Tug, but hit nothing more substantial than air

; for Tug, balanced lightly on his toes, not only avoided the clumsy

blows with professional ease, but landed a couple of punches before the discomfited warrior could recover—much to the joy of the spectators.

Tiring of this sport, Ginger strolled on a little way into the forest, which he had not yet properly examined. It surpassed anything he could have imagined. Everywhere, on the ground and in the trees, were great humps and mats of moss from which sprouted uncouth pitcher plants and orchids. The picture presented was artificial rather than natural ; with a moss-encrusted roof, sup.

ported by mossy columns, the forest looked more like a fairy grotto than a jungle. On examination Ginger found the moss to be the home of countless small insects and reptiles. He took care not to disturb them.

The sun was setting, and twilight quickly closing in, as he strolled back to the camp. As he walked he became aware that somewhere far away a drum was tapping—not so much a regular beat as a curious broken mutter. Presently other drums joined in, enhancing the strange wildness of the scene. He jumped when close at hand yet another drum joined in the savage music—toma-tomatom-tom, toma-tom-toma-tom.

Walking towards the sound, Ginger came upon a scene that was as barbaric as could be imagined. Suspended from a great branch was what appeared to be a length of tree-trunk, hollow, with a slit down the side. Upon this a Punan, wearing a hideous mask and decorated like a Christmas-tree, was beating with his fists, sometimes pausing to listen.

In these intervals the distant drums could be heard answering. Around the performer the warriors of the tribe had formed a silent circle. Chief Suba was there, with Rex beside him. They, too, appeared to be listening intently.

* Ginger went up to Rex. "What's going on ? " he asked wonderingly.

"Bush telegraph," answered Rex laconically. "Bush what ? "

Telegraph. These fellows don't need radio. They can speak to each other over enormous distances with these drums."

"So I've been told," replied Ginger. "What are they talking about now ? "

"I don't know, but it's something unusual. I don't understand this drum talk—I don't think any white man has ever got the hang of it. The whole thing is a mystery. I only know that Suba has told me things within a few minutes of their happening hundreds of miles away, and he's been right every time. Presently he'll tell us what this is all about."

The drumming ended abruptly, and a sound like a sigh escaped from the assembled warriors. At this moment Biggles and several officers appeared through the trees. They, too, apparently were curious to know what the noise was about.

Suba spoke rapidly to Rex, waving his hands in primitive pantomime. Rex turned to the British officers. "He says there are three white men in the jungle. They are travelling up a river in a boat. Yellow men are pursuing them."

Biggles stared. "That sounds grim."

"If the drums say it is so, you can bet your life it's true."

"I don't doubt it," admitted Biggles quickly. "I've had some experience of this sort of thing. Ask Suba if there is any other information."

There was a brief conversation and Rex turned again to Biggles.

"He says that two of the white men are sick. The yellow men will catch them."

"They must be the three fellows we saw in the boat yesterday morning I" cried Ginger. "

That's about it. The Japs are after them. They've headed into the jungle in the hope of escaping capture."

Biggles looked grave. "Poor beggars. They'll never get through." He looked at Rex. "

Ask Suba if he knows how far away they are."

Rex spoke again to the chief, who held up two fingers.

"That means two days' march," said Rex. "These fellows don't reckon distance as we do."

Two days, to natives who are used to the forest, means about forty miles."

"I say, you know, we ought to do something about this," put in Bertie, polishing his eyeglass. "We can't let these beastly Japs collar three of our fellows—no, by jingo."

Biggles looked worried. "What can we do ? " he asked helplessly. "We're here for major operations, not to rescue odd people in the jungle. Of course, if it was a matter of flying down and just picking them up I'd do it like a shot ; but even if we saw these blokes we couldn't land in the jungle."

"What about asking Suba to send out a relief party ? " suggested Algy.

"If these chaps are sick they ought to have medical attention," interposed Ginger.

"I realize that," muttered Biggles. "Like you, I feel we ought to do something, but it isn't easy to see what we can do. I daren't leave here myself for any length of time in case the Liberator comes back with urgent instructions." He looked at Rex. "Ask Suba in which direction he reckons these white men are."

Rex spoke to the chief, who without hesitation pointed towards the north-east.

"That's it," declared Ginger. "That's where we saw the boat yesterday."

"The chief says he's willing to send some warriors if the white men are friends of ours,"

said Rex. "I'll take a medical chest and go with them if you like. After all, I'm not a service pilot, so you don't really need me now I've introduced you to Suba. I could send up smoke signals so that from the air you could see where we were. At present the fellows must be in the bamboo belt."

"That sounds a sensible arrangement," answered Biggles. "I suppose these Punans can get through the jungle?"

"They can if they want to—after all, it's their home. They don't go far in the ordinary way because there's no need."

"All right," agreed Biggles. "I'll leave you to do what you think best. We'll co-operate as far as we can. When will you start ? "

"As the matter is obviously urgent I think we ought to start right away," announced Rex, after he had spoken to Suba.

"Can I go ? " asked Ginger.

"No," returned Biggles shortly. "I don't want you down with fever. Besides, I shall need you in the morning. We'll have a look round from the air as soon as it gets light."

Realizing the wisdom of this decision, Ginger did

not argue. Instead, he waited with the others while the rescue - party, a score of painted warriors armed with razor-edged, broad-bladed war kris., and blowpipes, filed away into the jungle. Suba took the lead, and Rex, a rifle in the crook of his arm, walked beside him.

Having nothing more to do, the officers returned to the mess, and soon afterwards dispersed to their sleeping quarters.

Ginger was awakened by the roar of aero engines. Running out in his pyjamas, he was surprised to find that dawn was just breaking. Against the pearly grey of the sky the Liberator was circling, losing height. By the time he had got his clothes on it had landed and taxied under its palm-frond canopy. Angus, Ferocity Ferris and Henry Harcourt were climbing down. Biggles was already there.

"So you got through all right ? " he called to Angus. "Where did you get those bullet-holes in your tail ? "

"We had a little affair wi' a bunch of Mitsubishi fighters just after we left Darwin,"

explained Angus. "One of 'em did that." He pointed to the tail. "He won't do any more shooting in this world, I'm thinkin'. Ferocity made a bonfire of him. I've brought ye a load of stuff, Biggles, and a despatch from the Air Commodore at Darwin. I know what it's about, because he told me. It seems that Mindanao—that's the biggest of the Philippine Islands, as dootless ye know—has fallen. They think maybe the American general, Barton, has escaped, so will ye keep a look-out for him."

"That's a pretty tall order," answered Biggles. "There are about ten thousand islands in these waters. What are we supposed to do—call at each one in turn ? "

"It isna an order," returned Angus. "The Air Commodore just mentions it in case we see anybody that looks like the general. Losh, I'

m tired. I'll help myself to a spot of sleep if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," Biggles told him, and turning to the flight sergeant, who was standing by, ordered him to see about getting the big machine unloaded. He then read the despatch, but finding that it contained no more than Angus had related, he put it away and turned to Ginger.

"Let's go and try to locate these fellows in the jungle," he suggested. "The rest of you stand by until we get back. We shan't be long."

A few minutes later the Beaufighter was in the air, skimming the tree-tops on a north-easterly course. Ginger studied the ground closely, but could see no sign of Rex and the Punans—not that he expected to. Nothing could be seen except the tops of trees rising and falling in undulations, with a steady slope towards the distant sea. Here and there it was possible to get a glimpse of a broad mysterious river, sometimes placid, sometimes white with foam as it tore through a gulch in the mountains. It was up this stream, presumably, that the white men had entered the island in their desperate effort to escape from the Japanese.

Ginger was still staring down when Biggles's voice came over the telephone. "Tally-ho !

I think we've found something." With the words the Beaufighter began to climb.

Looking ahead, Ginger saw, not without surprise, a seaplane. It was a type of aircraft that he had never seen before, but as it was neither British nor German he assumed that it was Japanese.

Very soon Biggles confirmed this. "It looks like an old Kawanishi," he observed. "It carries a crew of two. They haven't seen us—they're much too interested in something on the ground."

The Japanese aircraft was, in fact, circling repeatedly at a low altitude. The rear gunner was crouching over his gun, which pointed downward in a manner that suggested he had either been using it against a ground target, or was about to do so.

"We'd better dispose of the opposition before we try to see the object of attraction,"

remarked Biggles in a hard voice. "I've got a pretty good idea of what he's after, though."

The combat with the Japanese aircraft was hardly worthy of the name. It was obvious that both pilot and gunner apprehended no danger whatever, for they continued to circle, devoting their entire attention to the ground. Biggles merely manœuvred the Beaufighter between it and the sun, and then, going in close, shot the aircraft to pieces. This occurred at such a low altitude that the crew could not have used their parachutes even if they had not been hit by bullets, and the whole thing fell into the trees where the jungle at once hid it from view. After a swift reconnaissance of the sky for other possible aircraft, Biggles went down to the tree-tops, and after cruising up and down for a minute or two, came upon something for which he was not unprepared. Half submerged in shallow water near the bank of the river was a boat. It was lying at a bend, where the swirl of the water had thrown up a strip of beach in the shape of a crescent moon.

When Ginger first saw the boat it appeared to be abandoned. There was no sign of life.

But as the Beaufighter roared low over it a white man ran from the fringe of jungle near the spot. He looked up at the aircraft, gesticulating violently. Biggles took the Beaufighter still lower ; in fact, he came down the river with his wheels nearly touching the water, a position from which it was possible to see two other men. One was sitting up, and the other lying in the shade of a palm.

Ginger spoke sharply to Biggles. "Those fellows are in a bad way."

"I'm afraid you're right," answered Biggles, pulling the Beaufighter up to turn back over the spot.

"Rex must still be a good day's journey away." "Quite that."

"He may never find these chaps."

"We can indicate the spot from the air," Biggles pointed out.

"What about me going down with the emergency box, to give them a hand until Rex arrives ? " suggested Ginger.

"Are you talking about baling out ? "

"Of course."

"It's risky. Ten to one you'll fall in the river or get hung up in the trees."

"The river is shallow near the boat or it would be out of sight," protested Ginger. "I think we ought to take a chance to help those chaps. A few hours may make a lot of difference, apart from which it would encourage them to know that help was on the way."

Biggles hesitated. "All right—if you feel like taking a chance," he agreed.

"I'll risk it," declared Ginger. "Come up the river as slowly as you dare."

"Okay." Biggles turned the Beaufighter, and lining up with the stream, brought the machine along at little more than stalling speed.

With the emergency box and the portable medicine chest under his left arm, Ginger went to the escape hatch. "See you later," he called, and slid through.

His jump was well timed, but as Biggles had prophesied, he fell into the trees. When he saw what

was going to happen he bunched himself, raising his knees to his chin and protecting his face with his arm. Fortunately he did not strike a big branch ; he crashed through the smaller ones, disturbing a school of monkeys which fled, shrieking. The parachute fabric caught in the branches ; it was torn to shreds, but it broke his fall, and he landed in a heap of swampy ground with the torn shrouds, the emergency box and the medicine chest beside him. As he picked himself up he heard a crashing in the bushes, and a white man, thin and pale from fever or exhaustion, or both, stood before him.

"By Jove ! " cried the stranger. "That was a stout effort. Are you hurt ?"

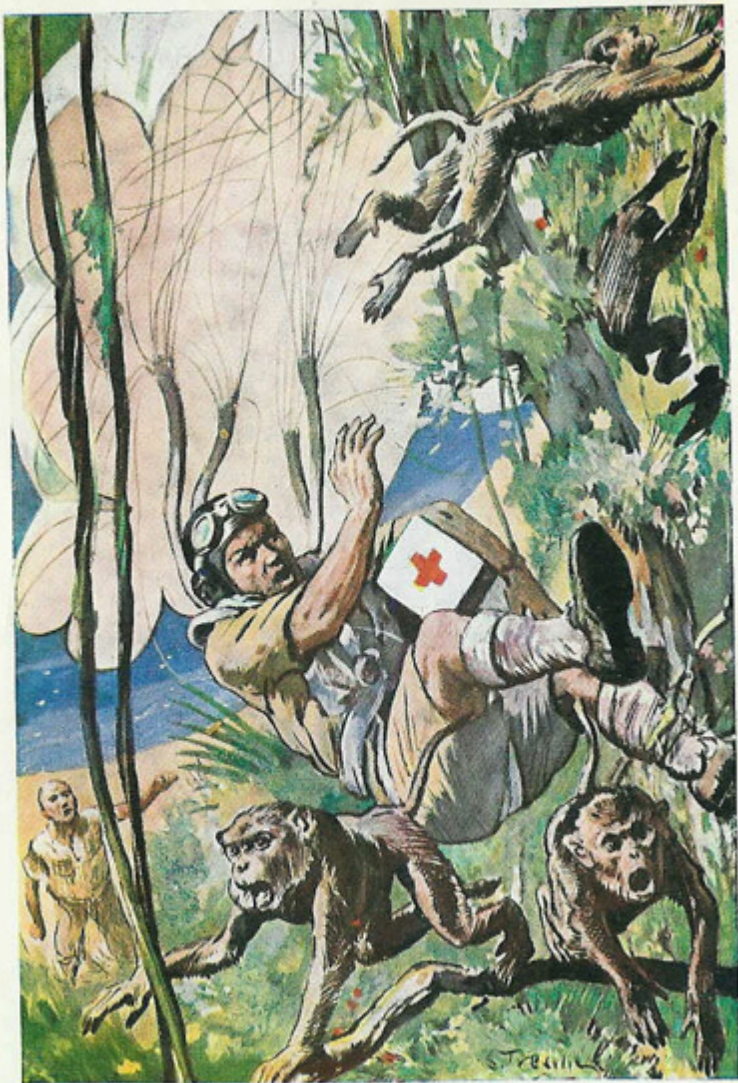
"No, thanks," replied Ginger, rubbing his bruises. "Pleased to meet you. My name's HebblethwaiteGinger for short. I dropped in to see if you needed help."

"We need plenty," was the answer. "We're in a bit of a mess. I'm Jackson, late of the British Consulate at Manila. I'm all right, but the two fellows with me—they're Americans—are in a bad way. The Japs are hot on our trail, too."

Ginger nodded. "That's about how we worked it out, so we decided to do something about it."

Picking up the equipment, the two men made their way to the river,

where Ginger made the acquaintance of the two Americans, named Gray and Flannagan, who turned out to be the pilot and gunner of a United States naval aircraft. As Jackson had said, they were



Fortunately he did not strike a big branch ; he crashed through the smaller ones, disturbing a school of monkeys

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both in a bad way—not, as Ginger had supposed, from fever or gunshot wounds, but from flogging by the Japanese. To say that Ginger was horrified would be to put it mildly. The medicine chest

was brought into use, and as soon as they had been made fairly comfortable Ginger was told the facts. They were brief.

Jackson, the Britisher, had been at Manila when the town had been captured by the Japanese. He had tried to escape in a pearling lugger, but had been captured and taken with other prisoners to the island of Mindanao. There he had met the two American airmen, who had been shot down on a reconnaissance flight. They had tried to escape, and in doing so had struck a Japanese soldier. For this, on being recaptured, they had been brutally flogged—treatment that drove them to a frenzy and made them all the more determined to get away. This, with the help of Jackson, they had been able to do. They had taken a sailing-boat with the object of eventually reaching Australia. They had been pursued, and would have been caught by a motor-boat had not a British aircraft unexpectedly appeared out of the blue and sunk the Jap.

Ginger grinned. "That was us," he remarked vaguely.

The rest was much as he had supposed. The three fugitives had got to Borneo. Without food or water, they had been compelled to come ashore in the hope of obtaining both.

They were again discovered, so had taken to the jungle. Japanese soldiers, guided by a seaplane, were following them. The seaplane had fired at them repeatedly and sunk their boat, with the result that they were stranded, exhausted, without food, with the Japanese behind them, and the unknown jungle, and possibly head-hunters, in front of them.

Their joy when Ginger informed them that a British unit was still operating from the heart of Borneo, and that a relief party was on the way to pick them up, made any risks he had taken well worth while.

"What we've got to do is dodge the Japs until the rescue party arrives," he concluded. "

Haven't you fellows any weapons ? "

"Not one," answered Jackson. "What's our best plan do you think ? We can't do much in the way of marching, I'm afraid."

"I think we'd better stay where we are," replied Ginger after considering the situation. "

We couldn't get through the jungle, and we should probably get lost if

we tried. The best thing is to stay by the river where we can be seen from the air. Biggles—that's my C.O.

— knows where we are, and will guide the relief party to the spot. It seems to be a case of who will get here first —the relief party or the Japs."

CHAPTER V

WAR IN THE JUNGLE

As it happened, the Japanese arrived first. Ginger heard them before he saw them. He had passed a

miserable, restless night, tormented by myriads of minute sand-flies and mosquitoes against which there was no protection. He spent most of the night scratching himself, and listening to the strange noises that came out of the jungle.

Just before dawn silence fell, and in the distance he heard what he thought was a human shout. He was not quite sure of this, realizing that it might be one of the monkeys that swarmed in the trees. Presently the sound came again, nearer, from the lower reaches of the river. The other three were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, oblivious to mosquitoes and everything else, this being due in large measure to the fact they had eaten their first real meal for over a fortnight. He was loath to awaken them, so he walked down the river as far as the sand-bar would permit, and then climbed a tree that commanded a view of the long straight reach of water lying beyond. One glance and his fears were realized.

Coming up the river were five canoes. The paddlers were natives, but the men packed in them were Japanese soldiers. They were examining the banks of the river as they came, presumably for signs of the fugitives who, as their boat had not been passed, must be somewhere ahead of them. , Ginger realized that when they came to the spot where the boat lay half submerged they would know at once that the three white men were not far away. Unfortunately there was no way of concealing or destroying the boat.

Not a little worried, Ginger returned to the sleeping men, narrowly avoiding stepping on a hooded cobra that lay curled up on the sand. It reared, hissing. Ginger side-stepped and ran for his life. Actually, at the moment he was more concerned with the approaching Japanese than with the beasts of the jungle. He woke Jackson first, he being the fittest of the three.

"The Japs are coming up the river in canoes," he informed him.

Jackson scrambled to his feet. "I was afraid of that." He pointed to the boat. "Even if we hide they'll see that, land, and come after us."

"I know, and I don't see what we can do about it," answered Ginger. "There's just a chance that we may find a hiding-place in the jungle."

"We shall be smothered with leeches," warned Jackson.

"That's better than being smothered with bullet-holes," Ginger pointed out grimly.

As it happened they were saved from this desperate resort, for while they were getting the two Americans to

their feet there came the sound for which Ginger had secretly been hoping. It was the roar of aircraft. A minute later, not one but three Beaufighters appeared. By this time Ginger had flung some fairly dry reeds in a heap and set fire to them, so that a column of smoke rose upwards. This was in order to let Biggles know they were still in the same place. He had no means of sending a message, so he could not tell Biggles about the Japanese ; he could only hope that he would see them, and felt pretty sure that he would.

Thereafter things happened quickly, and with a good deal of noise. Ginger did not witness the destruction of the canoes, but he saw the Beaufighters diving, and heard the roar of their guns. Pandemonium broke loose in the jungle. Parrots screamed and monkeys howled.

Later, Ginger learned that three of the canoes had been sunk in midstream ; the other two had managed to reach the bank, and the occupants had taken cover under the trees.

Presently Biggles's Beaufighter, recognisable by its single red band, came cruising low up the river. As it passed over the sand-bar a small object fell from it. It turned out to be a cigarette tin. In it was a scrap of paper on which had been pencilled the message :

Stand fast. Rex is near you. Taffy." Ginger realized that Taffy had taken his place in the gun-turret of Biggles's machine.

Having dropped the message, the Beaufighter turned and rejoined the other two machines that were now raking the edge of the forest with their guns.

"The relief party is near us," Ginger told his companions.

"So are some of the Japs," answered Jackson grimly. "Look." He pointed.

Following the line of his finger, Ginger saw Japanese soldiers emerging from the jungle at the water's edge.

They did not move openly, but crouching low, advanced independently in short rushes.

"They're not concerned about us," opined Ginger. "In fact they don't even know we're here. The Beau-fighters are shooting them up, and they're trying to get away. But if they come along here and spot us we shall be in a mess."

"We'd better start retiring into the forest," declared Jackson.

"Just a minute," replied Ginger.

He had noticed a curious thing. The leading Japanese soldier had stumbled, and then fallen flat on his face. He lay where he had fallen, his limbs twitching. Another did the same thing.

"What the deuce is happening ? " muttered Ginger.

The remaining Japanese were backing away from the forest. Some of them began shooting into the trees. There was no answering fire, yet they continued to fall. There was something so uncanny about it that Ginger's skin turned to goose-flesh.

"I've got it ! " cried Jackson. "Blowpipes ! Your friends the Punans are in the jungle shooting poisoned darts into them. The Japs can't even see them."

"How horrible," returned Ginger—and he meant it. For the first time he realized the futility of trying to fight the jungle men who could deal death silently, unseen. For all their modern weapons the Japanese were powerless. The survivors fell into a panic.

Some, flinging away their equipment, jumped into the river and tried to swim across.

"Crocodile meat," murmured Jackson. "These rivers are full of the brutes."

Ginger shuddered. He was glad he had not fallen into the river when

he landed by parachute. He had forgotten that there were such things as crocodiles.

While he was still staring at the unpleasant scene, Rex Larrymore came running out of the undergrowth. His clothes were torn, and he was mud up to the waist.

"So there you are," he observed cheerfully. "I had a bit of a job to find you."

"How did you know I was here ? " asked Ginger. " Biggles dropped us a message and told us."

"I see."

" Suba and his lads are busy," remarked Rex. "So I notice," answered Ginger.

"You've nothing more to worry about," went on Rex. "As they say in official circles, our troops have the situation in hand."

As Ginger introduced Rex to his companions, the Beaufighters roared low overhead and disappeared in the direction of the base. Presently Suba appeared, followed by several of his warriors. They nearly all carried burdens that made Ginger back away in horror. They were Japanese heads.

"Must they do that ? " gasped Ginger, feeling sick.

"Take no notice," said Rex quietly. "Heads are merely souvenirs to them. Our chaps collect German helmets—there really isn't very much difference. If you protest you may upset Suba."

Ginger gulped and said no more. Rex held a consultation with the chief, as a result of which two rough portable chairs were constructed for the transport of the injured Americans, who were in no condition to face the long march back to camp.

Then began the return trip through the jungle. It was unmarked by incident, except that at every halt they made a smoke fire to show Biggles where they were, whereupon Beaufighters dropped parcels of food and cans of water.

Two days later, weary and dirty, covered with the little white blisters raised by mosquitoes, the party arrived back at Lucky Strike camp, to find that all possible preparations for their comfort had been made.

After they had bathed, and the Americans had had their backs properly dressed, the fugitives told their story with more detail.

Of their own adventures they had little to say. They were too full of what was happening at Cotabato, on the island of Mindanao, where the white prisoners of several nationalities had been concentrated by the Japanese. There were two women among them. Conditions had been bad, but bearable, until there had arrived from Japan to take command a brutal commandant named Yashnowada. The Americans trembled with impotent fury when they spoke of him and his barbaric behaviour towards his helpless prisoners. It was this man who had caused them to be flogged. Several white soldiers—British, American and Dutch—had died under such flogging.

"The shocking part of it was we could do nothing," muttered Bill Gray, burying his face in his hands as though to shut out the memory of the horrors he had seen. "God help you if you ever fall into the hands of that yellow devil."

"Just who is this man ? " asked Biggles in a hard voice.

"I don't know much about him," answered Pat Flannagan, who spoke with an Irish-American accent. "He seems to be the commandant of the occupied countries. Following the German method, his object appears to be to cow everybody, natives as well as whites, by sheer terrorism. Cotabato, where he has his headquarters, is a living hell. I nearly go mad when I think of white women in that place."

Biggles's face was pale. "Are there ,many troops at this place Cotabato ? "

Jackson answered. "Not many. Yashnowada is more of a glorified policeman—on the lines of the German Gestapo. Most of the front-line troops have been shifted nearer to the fighting—Burma in the north, and the Australian islands in the south. No doubt the same sort of thing is going on in other places. It seems terrible that we can't do anything about it. How do you come to be here, anyway ? "

Biggles explained the purpose of his squadron, and how, with the help of Rex Larrymore, it had come to Borneo. "How many white prisoners do you reckon there are at Cotabato ?

" he inquired.

"There were between forty and fifty when we left. Some of them are

civilians, mostly British, Australian and Dutch traders. The others are nearly all American airmen who have been shot down. Barton is there. There are also some British natives, Indians and so on."

Biggles started. "Do you mean the American General Barton ? "

"Yeah."

"But I heard he had escaped."

"He did,- but the Japs ran him down on one of the smaller islands. That swine Yashnowada has beaten him up to try to make him say what he knows about military plans."

There was a movement among the assembled officers but none of them spoke.

"This is all very disturbing," said Biggles in a low voice. "I almost wish you fellows hadn't told me about this. I shan't sleep at night for thinking about it. I know what war is like against the Nazis, and I've had some experience of trouble with plain unvarnished savages from whom one doesn't expect anything but murder ; but these semi-civilized Japanese seem to be the worst of the lot. Well, Jackson, and you, Gray and Flannagan, I think you'd better get along to Australia. I'll have you flown down right away. I have a machine waiting to go."

"I don't want to go to Australia," growled Gray. Biggles looked surprised. "You don't want to go ? "

"No. I've only one idea now, and that's to slaughter as many of these yellow devils as I can."

"That's all very well, but be practical. You can't fight a war single-handed. Just what have you got in mind ? " asked Biggles.

"You can leave me here."

" Why ? What can you do here ? "

"Help you. To start with, I'm a pilot. I know these seas and the coasts as well as I know the palm of my hand. I was stationed at Manila for a long time, and I've served on an aircraft carrier cruising among the islands. Flannagan was my buddy all the time, so he knows about it as I do."

" Sure I That's right," agreed Flannagan.

"I know my way about a bit, too," put in Jackson. "I've served in the Diplomatic Service in the Dutch East Indies for ten years."

"Then you probably know something about Mindanao ? " said Biggles thoughtfully.

Jackson smiled. "I was British Agent in Cotabato for two seasons. I know every inch of it, and the country around."

"Then you must know the people there ? "

"All those worth knowing. You know how it is in these outposts. It's eighteen months since I was there as a free man, but I don't suppose it's changed much, except, of course, that the whites have gone. Why do you ask ? Thinking of making a trip there yourself ? "

Biggles hesitated for a moment before answering. "I couldn't do that with my present equipment."

"There's an aerodrome — or rather, a landing ground."

"You're not suggesting that I land an aircraft. on it ? "

" Well—no."

"I'm afraid the aerodrome is no use to us. Unfortunately I haven't any marine aircraft suitable for landing on the water near the coast. I wonder . . ."

Biggles walked to the door and gazed across the deserted aerodrome. For a minute or two he was silent ; then he came back into the room.

"I'll tell you what," he decided. "Jackson, you go down to Darwin with Angus Mackail in the *Liberator* and report this business to the Air Officer Commanding. He, no doubt, will consult the American Commander-in-Chief. Apart from the horrible thought of leaving white prisoners in the hands of this devil Yashnowada, the Americans want General Barton back. He's a valuable officer. Angus, you'll see the A.O.C. Tell him we're willing to have a shot at getting these prisoners away, but we should need an amphibian aircraft, one that can land here in the first place, and later, on water. Obviously, we couldn't transport between forty and fifty people in one go, even if we got hold of them, but if we could get them out of the camp it might be possible to bring them over in relays. If there was an important military objective at Cotabato that we could deal with at the same time, the Higher Command would be more likely to fall for the idea."

"There is," put in Jackson quickly. " Cotabato is one of the main ammunition and stores dumps for the proposed Japanese attack on Australia."

"Why the dickens didn't you say so before ? " demanded Biggles.

"We were talking about the prisoners," explained Jackson apologetically. "I wasn't thinking so much about the dump as the people there. It's the thought of the women that sends me crazy."

"Who are they ? "

"One is Mary Stockton. She's the daughter of a member of the Consulate staff. Her father must be in a way about her—he was in London making a report to the Foreign Office when the crack-up occurred." As he spoke Jackson blushed slightly, and Biggles understood more clearly why he was so upset.

"She's a friend of yours ? " he suggested.

"As a matter of fact she's rather more than that," admitted Jackson. "We had a private understanding about getting married."

"Why didn't you get her away when you escaped yourself ? "

"That was the idea, but it didn't work out that way. We were seen and chased before we could get to the women's quarters. There seemed no point in just giving myself up, so I stayed with Gray and Flannagan."

"I see. Who's the other woman ? "

"Doctor Harding. She's American, a specialist on tropical diseases."

"I take it you'd go back to Cotabato if you thought there was a chance of getting your girl away ? "

"You bet your life I would," answered Jackson warmly.

Biggles nodded. "I understand. But let us get this clear. Everyone will, I'm sure, realize that this is a

subordinate command, and I can't do just as I like. I mean, we're an established unit, and I may be called upon to carry out some special job at any moment. It would be unfair to the people at home if when we were urgently wanted we were off on some jaunt of our own. In other words, I should have to get permission before I started an enterprise that was not of a strictly military nature. The only thing I

can do is send the Liberator to Australia right away and see how the A.O.C. feels about it. Angus, you take it down.

Jackson will go with you. Harcourt and Ferris will act as gunners. If the Higher Command views the proposition favourably, try to get hold of an amphibian."

"Are you sure they have such a thing ? " asked Angus.

"Yes, Australia has always been keen on amphibians. They have several types. I've got some despatches to go down, so the sooner you start the better. The rest of us will remain here and carry on as usual. That's all."

Angus nodded. "I'll get off right away."

"I'd better get ready," put in Jackson.

"Get back as soon as you can," requested Biggles ; "to-morrow night if you can manage it."

"I'll try," promised Angus. "In still air at cruising speed the trip takes about seven hours."

Twenty minutes later the Liberator roared into the air and headed into the south-eastern sky.

Biggles looked up from the folding table at which he had been making some notes.

"While we're waiting for the Liberator to come back I think it would be a good thing if we got some photos of this place Cotabato. With photos in front of us, Gray and Flannagan can point out the main features so that we shall have an idea of the layout in case the Higher

Command decides to take action. There's no immediate hurry—to-morrow will do. I shall have to stay here in case Australia tries to get into touch with me, but the other two machines can go. Bertie, you take the camera. Algy will look after your tail while you're concentrating on the photos."

"Why not let me go with the camera kite ? " suggested Bill Gray. "I know every inch of the ground and can point out the vital spots."

"That's an idea," agreed Biggles. "But are you well enough ? "

"Well enough to sit in a seat and talk—or, mebbe, handle the guns."

"All right. That's up to you. I'd be glad of your co-operation. Bertie, that means Bill will go with you instead of Tex."

Algy spoke. "I'll take Ginger with me, if you don't mind, in the escort plane."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Why Ginger ? What's the matter with Tug, your regular gunner ? "

"Better ask him yourself;" murmured Algy.

Biggles's eyes came to rest on Tug. "What's wrong ? "

Tug, looking sheepish, held up a bandaged wrist. "I was having a round or two with Suba and we got into a clinch. He nearly broke my wrist."

For a moment Biggles looked annoyed. "I'm the last man to object to officers taking recreation, but there's no sense in putting yourself out of action. The enemy will do that soon enough, no doubt. I need every man I've got. If you must fool about, be more careful."

"Yes, sir," responded Tug obediently.

Biggles turned to Algy. "All right. Ginger goes with you in the back seat. If that's settled I think it's about all."

CHAPTER VI

AN UNWELCOME PASSENGER

TWO hours before dawn the following day Bertie's machine was in the air heading north-east, with

Bill Gray in the gunner's cockpit. Algy, with Ginger in the rear seat, followed, and took up position just above and behind him.

The atmosphere, although dark, was crystal clear, and Ginger surveyed it with the methodical thoroughness that is the result of long experience. The distance from Lucky Strike to Cotabato, he had ascertained from the map, was about seven hundred miles. By ordinary travel the trip would take many days, perhaps weeks. He expected that the Beaufighters, even at the steady cruising speed at which they were flying, would do it in rather less than three hours. They had judged their time in order to arrive as soon after dawn as

the light would permit good photographs being taken.

After crossing the coast the sea provided Ginger with a fertile field for speculation.

Whichever way he looked he could see islands, some large, some mere islets. There were literally hundreds of them, and he found himself wondering who, if anybody, lived on them, and what they did. When the war was over, he decided, a man might do worse than make a protracted cruise round these remote fragments of land to see who and what was on them.

The Beaufighters, having climbed to twenty thousand feet, levelled out and roared on through a lonely sky.

They roared on for an hour, two hours, yet the only thing apart from water that could be seen were the islands that for ever floated up over the edge of the world, to pass below and disappear astern. The water was calm, unmarked by the wake of a single ship.

Thinking over this strange loneliness, Ginger thought that very few ships would be seen in normal times ; what few there were that used these treacherous waters had either been sunk, or had fled to distant ports.

Dawn was breaking in an extravagant flood of pink and gold when Algy's voice came over the telephone. "There's a big slice of mud on the horizon. I think it must be Mindanao."

"Yes, it ought to be the place we're making for," agreed Ginger, and set about his task of sky-watching with greater vigilance. He knew that Japanese aircraft might be encountered at any time, and he had no intention of being caught off his guard. While he did the watching, Bertie and Bill would be able to devote themselves entirely to their task of getting the photographs.

The two Beaufighters roared on towards the land that now entirely filled the horizon ahead. There was no longer any doubt about it being their objective. Details grew more distinct, and Bertie's machine, guided, Ginger supposed, by Bill Gray, took up a course towards a town of some importance. This turned out to be Cotabato, the objective. In the clear morning light every feature stood out in a manner that promised excellent negatives.

Bertie proceeded with his task while Algy patrolled the sky. There was practically no opposition. It appeared to take the invaders some time

to realize that a hostile aircraft was overhead, for it was several minutes before the high-angle guns came into action, and then the shooting was irregular and badly aimed. Towards the finish Ginger saw some machines leaving the ground, but they were too far below to represent a danger. Long before they could climb up to the British machines the Beaufighters would be on their way back. The job looked like being a mere routine one, and as such Ginger was glad when it was over.

Bertie spoke to Algy over the radio, and Algy passed the information on to Ginger.

"That's all," he said. " Bertie reckons he's got some good stuff. We'll get home."

Wing to wing the Beaufighters proceeded on the return journey at what was, comparatively speaking, a leisurely pace. There was no need to work the engines hard when there was no immediate hurry. Ginger kept a wary eye on the hostile aircraft until they abandoned the futile chase and turned back towards their base, now a smudge on the horizon. Satisfied that all was well, he relaxed, and prepared to settle himself in his seat.

As he did so, a movement on the floor attracted his attention. For a moment he thought that a cable had come adrift. Then, to his unspeakable horror, he saw that the moving thing was not a cable, but a snake. It was not a very big snake. It was a slim little thing about two feet long. But this did not lull Ginger into a sense of false security. He knew what it was, for he had seen ,one before, in India. It was a krait, perhaps the deadliest reptile on earth. Its bite means death in a few minutes.

For a little while Ginger stared at the creature, saucer-eyed, while the colour drained out of his face. The knowledge that the reptile must have been in the cockpit with him for more than three hours gave him such a shock that he was hardly capable of thought.

Where the snake had come from he did not know—not that it mattered. The thing was there. Obviously, it had got into the aircraft while the machine was on the ground. Why it had not bitten him he could not imagine, unless it had been tucked away in some pocket and had been scared or paralyzed by the roar of the engines. One thing was certain : it was not paralyzed now. Nor was it passive. With its little tongue flickering, it reared up and gazed at Ginger with such malice in its eyes that his mouth went dry with fear.

What to do he did not know. His first instinct was to jump out of the machine regardless of what lay below. Then he saw the ocean underneath and thought better of it. Desperate thoughts flashed through his mind. It seemed fantastic that although he was armed with machine-guns capable of sinking a fair-sized ship, they were useless to him. He had no other weapon. He wondered vaguely what would happen if they were attacked by hostile planes, for now that the snake was on the move he would not dare to touch his guns. The Beaufighter rocked slightly. The snake hissed.

Ginger remembered the telephone. " Algy, for God's sake fly straight," he said in a hoarse voice.

Algy answered, unconcerned, " Why ? Is something wrong ? "

Ginger nearly choked. "There's a snake in my cockpit."

"Throw it out," suggested Algy.

"Don't be a fool," grated Ginger. "It's a krait." Algy's voice took on a different tone as he evidently realized the peril. "Where is it ? "

"On the floor—a couple of feet away from me. If you bank you'll throw it on my feet."

Algy was silent for a moment. "What shall I

Ginger was nearly in a panic. "I don't know," he confessed.

" Haven't you any suggestion to make ? "

"None. I can't think of anything—unless I bale out."

"You can't do that ! "

"But I can't hope to sit here for over two hours without being bitten."

There was another interval after Ginger had stated this simple fact.

"How about pushing it through the escape hatch ? " suggested Algy.

"What—with my hands ? " sneered Ginger, still staring at the snake, which seemed to be working itself into a fury.

"There's only one thing for it," announced Algy crisply. "I'll fly low over an island and you'll have to bale out. We'll try to pick you up

later. It's your only chance as far as I can see."

"You realize that even if I go the snake will remain, and it may work its way along to the back of your cockpit ? "

"Good lord I " gasped Algy. Clearly, he hadn't thought of that.

"Are you going to stay in the machine ? " asked Ginger.

"For two hours ? With that thing creeping about ? Not on your life," declared Algy. "I'm going to land, even if it means a crack-up. If I can't find a flat patch on the next island we'll both go over together. Just a minute while I tell Bertie the position."

"All right, but don't be long about it."

The roar of the engines faded to a purr as the Beau-fighter went down in a shallow glide.

Ginger sat and stared at the snake as if it fascinated him. He knew they were losing height, but he dare not risk moving to see where they were. Presently Algy spoke again.

"I've told Bertie how we're fixed. He says we can do nothing but jump out—if we can't make a landing. He's going to follow us down to see what happens."

"Go ahead," muttered Ginger, whose nerves were beginning to crack under the strain. "

Will it be better for me to stick to the machine, or jump ? "

"Hang on. I'll let you know. Wait till I've had a look at the next island. There's a biggish one just ahead of us. I think I can see beaches."

To Ginger, before Algy spoke again, the next ten minutes seemed like eternity.

"There's a pretty fair beach," said Algy. "I'm going to try to land."

"When the machine bumps the snake will strike."

"All right. When you feel me flatten out you'll know I'm practically on the carpet. Get the hatch open and get ready to jump for it. There's nothing else you can do."

The Beaufighter continued to descend. Ginger saw nothing but the

snake, but he was conscious of Bertie's machine close overhead. Once or twice its shadow fell on him.

Suddenly the snake seemed to see it, and its reaction was immediate. Ginger could only suppose that the krait took the plane to be a bird of prey ; at any rate, it moved swiftly towards the tail of the aircraft where it could not be seen. The machine flattened out.

Algy shouted " Jump ! "

But as the snake was no longer within striking distance, Ginger did not feel inclined to risk breaking his neck. Rigid, he sat where he was. He felt the wheels touch, and hoped that the tail-down position of the machine would cause the snake to slide farther away. What happened next he really did not know. The machine swerved suddenly. There was a tearing, rending crash as it collided violently with something.

Ginger had no recollection of getting out of the machine ; but he must have done so because he found himself standing on a sandy beach, staring with utter dismay at the crumpled remains of the Beaufighter. Algy, wild-eyed, scrambled from the wreckage and staggered towards him.

"Did the snake bite you ? " asked Ginger in all seriousness. He was still slightly bewildered by the calamity.

"I don't know," snarled Algy. "If it did I didn't feel it. Look at the machine."

"I'm looking at it," answered Ginger calmly. At that moment he was conscious of only one sensation, and that was thankfulness that he had at least escaped from the snake. He was prepared to die in the war—but not from snakebite.

"We're in a mess," announced Algy.

"I'd already realized it," returned Ginger, looking up at Bertie's machine, now circling overhead in an almost vertical bank. Ginger waved. " Bertie will at least be able to tell Biggles what happened," he observed.

With his hands in his pockets Algy stood and stared at the wreck. He still looked as if he couldn't believe it. He was still staring when Bertie zoomed, and sped away in the direction of the base.

"Best thing he can do," muttered Algy. "There was nothing he could do by remaining here."

"Have you any idea of where we are ? " asked Ginger.

"Not the remotest—beyond the fact that we're on a line between Borneo and Mindanao,"

returned Algy.

The island may be marked on my map. It's in the cockpit. I was in too much of a hurry to get out to bother about it. Perhaps you wouldn't mind fetching it ? "

"Suppose you go ? " suggested Ginger.

" It isn't much trouble, is it ? "

"No—but the snake might be. As far as I know it's still inside, and while it is I'm staying out. How did you come to crack up ? "

"Take a look round and work it out for yourself," muttered Algy. Shock, and the loss of his machine, seemed to have put him in a touchy mood.

Ginger accepted the advice. Looking about him he saw that they were on an island of considerable extent ; just how big he could not tell, for it was not possible to see the extremities. The wheel-tracks told the story of the crash. Algy had tried to get down on a narrow strip of beach that was really too small for such a purpose. He had made a stout effort, but one of his wheels had gone into a slight dip, with the result that the machine had been swung round. Its port wing had struck a tree, and the wing had been torn off.

The aircraft had then run on some rocks, and these had completed the ruin of what, a few minutes before, had been a sound, serviceable aeroplane.

"There goes the snake ! " suddenly shouted Algy, and snatching up a piece of palm frond, dashed off in pursuit of the reptile, which, having emerged from the crash, was making all speed towards the fringe of a jungle-covered hill. It disappeared into a bush.

"And to think a little beast like that could cause a mess like this," remarked Ginger disgustedly. "Not that I've anything to grumble about," he added. "It isn't everyone who can spend three hours in a

cockpit with a krait and get away with it. I'

m on the ground without having been bitten to death, and that's a lot more than I could have hoped for twenty minutes ago. Well, where do we go from here ? "

"We don't go anywhere," snapped Algy. "We stay here."

"You're not blaming me for this, I hope ? " protested Ginger in a hurt voice.

"Why didn't you examine your turret before you got into it ? "

"Well, I like that," declared Ginger warmly. "Anyone would think snakes were in the habit of roosting in aeroplanes. I once knew a fellow who found a mouse's nest in his wing—"

"Don't tell me," pleaded Algy. "I suppose we ought to be thankful to be alive. It's a pity about the machine, but as far as we're concerned we ought to be all right. If Biggles gets that amphibian he'll soon be here to pick us up."

"And if he doesn't get it ? "

"In that case we look like playing Swiss Family Robinson for the duration. The emergency box will save us from immediate starvation."

The box was fetched, and the castaways enjoyed a frugal meal. They examined the chart, but it did not tell them much because they had no means of knowing for certain which island they were on. All things taken into account, they were of the opinion that it was Talut Island, one of the Sulu group.

"Well, as the poor old Beau is a write-off we may as well burn it," suggested Algy. "It will never fly again. We can't do anything with it, and there's no sense in leaving it here for the Japs to examine. They'd probably salve some of the parts. We'll put a match to it, and then climb a hill to get a better idea of our bearings."

Ginger agreed, and in a few minutes the funeral pyre of the unlucky Beaufighter was blazing furiously.

"Let's go up the hill," suggested Algy, and then stopped dead, staring at something beyond Ginger's shoulder. Ginger, startled by his expression, swung round, and at the sight that met his eyes his stomach seemed to fall into his boots. Fifty yards away, towards them

were running some twenty men. They were Japanese soldiers. An officer, seeing them turn, shouted something. What he said Ginger did not know. He never knew.

He didn't care. He only knew that they had been captured, for escape was obviously impossible. Every Jap carried a rifle. Some were already taking aim.

Algy put up his hands. "It's no use," he told Ginger in a low voice. "They've got us cold."

Ginger, too, raised his hands slowly into the air.

In a moment they were surrounded. The Japanese officer, a little man with a busy manner, searched them, presumably for weapons. From time to time he said something.

Not being able to speak Japanese, Algy and Ginger could only shrug their shoulders. The officer beckoned and set off along the beach. Surrounded by an ample guard the prisoners followed.

"Where did this lot come from ? " muttered Ginger savagely.

"Don't ask me," returned Algy despondently. "Didn't you see them before you landed ? "

"Do you think I should have been such a fool as to land if I had ? " answered Algy sarcastically. "I didn't see a soul. We deserve all we get for standing there as if the perishing island belonged to us."

"It's a bit late to start worrying about that," observed Ginger philosophically.

A short walk explained the mystery of the sudden appearance of the enemy troops. They came to a small, almost landlocked cove. In the cove was a submarine, refuelling from cans that were being brought down from a secret hiding-place among the rocks.

"So that's it," muttered Algy. "Evidently the fellows who caught us are a working party left in charge of the dump."

"I've just had a horrible thought," said Ginger in a strained voice.

"What's the trouble now ? "

"If Biggles lands here looking for us, as he probably will, he'll be caught, too."

Algy groaned.

His lamentations were cut short by the Japanese. There had been a quick consultation between the officer who had captured them and the two naval officers who stood by the submarine supervising the refuelling. They now came to the prisoners.

"I hope they're not going to put us in that tin deathtrap," muttered Ginger, aghast.

It was soon made clear that this was the intention. The pipes of the fuel pumps were drawn in as they were pushed into a small boat and transported to the underwater craft.

It was no use protesting. The smell of hot oil came up the conning-tower to meet Ginger as he descended, for the first time in his life, into a submarine. They were escorted to a metal bench and made to sit on it. A sentry, revolver in hand, stood guard. And there they sat, without speaking, for about an hour, under the curious eyes of the little yellow men who formed the crew. Then the engines were started. The submarine began to move.

Snatches of conversation reached the prisoners' ears. Ginger caught one word that he understood. It was Cotabato.

"Looks as if we're going to make the acquaintance of Jackson's friend, Yashnowada," he said.

Algy nodded moodily. "Looks as if we escaped from one snake only to be bitten by another. Of the two, the halt was probably the less poisonous."

The submarine ploughed on through the lonely sea. The journey seemed interminable. It drove on all that day, all through the night and the following day. It submerged occasionally but for the most part it ran on the surface ; even so, the prisoners saw nothing but their steel walls. It was, as near as they could judge, approaching midnight on the second night when activity and much ringing of bells indicated that they were nearing their destination.

"Well, I reckon we shall soon know the worst," remarked Algy, as they were landed on a pier and, under an armed escort of four men, marched through the streets of a town to what had been, in peacetime, an hotel.

"I should say this is the headquarters of the congenial Yashnowada," murmured Ginger.

It was soon revealed that he was right. A short march down a corridor on the ground floor and the escort halted before a door. A knock, and it was opened. The prisoners were pushed inside.

It was a large room, well lighted by electricity. A fan suspended from the ceiling turned slowly, keeping the oppressive air on the move. The chief piece of furniture was a heavily carved Chinese desk. The prisoners were halted in front of it. From behind it a man seated in a chair regarded them speculatively and with evident satisfaction.

He was short, inclined to stoutness, with a broad

face in which the cheekbones were conspicuous. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles. A small black moustache drooped round the corners of a thin-lipped mouth. Pulling a writing pad towards him, he addressed the prisoners in English with a strong American accent.

"Your names ? "

These were given, as international law demanded. "Where have you come from ? "

Algy answered : "We have nothing more to say." The Japanese dropped his voice to a purr : "Where have you come from ? "

Neither Algy nor Ginger answered.

"So you will not speak, eh ? "

"We have said all that we are bound to say. We have nothing to add," replied Algy.

"You are members of the new secret squadron. Where is it ? "

Algy did not answer.

"Unless you tell me where this squadron is based, who commands it, and its purpose, I promise that every member that falls into my hands shall take twenty-four hours to die.

Now will you speak ? "

Algy and Ginger remained silent.

The Japanese spoke slowly : "I have been known to make the very dumb speak. You have until the morning to think it over. Take them away."

Algy and Ginger were marched away. CHAPTER VII

BIGGLES HEARS THE NEWS

MEANWHILE, Bertie, having watched Algy and Ginger crash without apparent injury, raced home

to Lucky Strike and reported the misadventure to Biggles. Bill Gray confirmed what Bertie had to report.

Biggles's first remark was, "It was my fault. I should have given orders for every machine to be thoroughly searched, always, before leaving the ground. I'm going to have a look at this island. Sorry, Bertie, but you'll have to come with me to show me just where it is ; otherwise I might waffle around for a week without finding the right island."

"Absolutely, old boy, absolutely," agreed Bertie. "The beastly sea is all cluttered up with islands—too many, I should say, yes, by jingo. That's right, Bill, isn't it ? "

Bill Gray smiled. "You've said it, buddy."

Biggles looked at Bill. "You've done enough flying for one day. Bertie and I will do this show."

So Bertie went back, now travelling in the rear cockpit of Biggles's machine. In just over an hour they were circling the spot where the crash had occurred. Biggles saw the burnt-out remains of the Beaufighter with surprise and alarm. He spoke tersely on the telephone.

" Bertie, I thought you said the machine got down all right and cracked up on the ground

? "

"That's right—absolutely. I saw it with my own eyes, as they say."

"Well, what do you make of it now ? "

"Burnt out, by Jove. It beats me, old soldier. There was no fire when tootled off."

"I don't see any sign of Algy or Ginger," muttered Biggles.

"Neither do I. They jolly well ought to be here, all the same, that's all I can say."

"Well, they're not," returned Biggles. "If they were here they'd show up. They couldn't help hearing us. I don't like the look of this."

Then Biggles saw something else. It was a long smear of oil on the placid surface of the ocean. It started at an almost landlocked lagoon and went on for as far as he could see.

Clearly such a trail could only be left by a mechanically-propelled vessel. With an uneasy suspicion forming in his mind, he followed the track for some distance. A speck on the ocean appeared far ahead, but even as he watched it it disappeared beneath the surface.

"So that's it," muttered Biggles. "A submarine."

For a minute or two he circled the spot where the submarine had submerged, but there was nothing he could do. He realized that the watch must have heard him coming, possibly seen him. Obviously, the submarine would remain submerged. There was no point in staying, so he flew back over his course, still following the trail, which, of course, took him to the lagoon.

He arrived just in time to see a number of figures scurrying out of sight into the jungle which covered the island. He noticed that they wore clothes, which told him that they were not natives. Had there been only two he would still have hoped that it might be the castaways ; but there were several. Apprehension became real alarm. He spoke again to Bertie.

"There are people on this island," he said. "Who they are I don't know, and we're not likely to find out from the air ; but since a submarine has been in the cove we may assume that these people here have some connection with it." He swerved suddenly as a line of tracer bullets shot up from the jungle. It was a minute before he spoke again. "

That tells us what we want to know. Natives don't possess modern machine-guns. This must be a Japanese base. There's nothing we can do about it now, so we may as well go home." Biggles headed for Lucky Strike.

"You think the blighters have got Algy and Ginger ? " asked Bertie.

"I don't think there's much doubt about that. They wouldn't suspect that the island was occupied. Neither should I, had I been in their position. Even if they had known I imagine they would have been caught just the same. I'm afraid it's a bad show."

Biggles didn't speak again until they landed on the aerodrome. There were glum faces when he told the others what he had seen, and what he suspected.

"The question is, did the submarine leave the island before Algy crashed ? If it did, then it's a thousand to one that Algy and Ginger are still on the island, prisoners. If it left after their arrival, they may be on it."

"What can we do ? " asked Bertie, polishing his eyeglass furiously.

"It'll need some thought before I can answer that question," answered Biggles. "It would be a risky business to try to put a Beaufighter down on the island at the best of times. As it is, what could two people do against an unknown quantity of Japs that we know pretty well for certain are there ? I saw five or six, which means that there are probably more.

They've got at least one machine-gun."

"A seaplane could land on the water," suggested Rex.

"Unfortunately we haven't got a seaplane," returned Biggles. "We've asked for an amphibian. If we get one it will be a different matter. We might then, at some risk, effect a landing, and perhaps find out just what is happening. As it is, we shall have to cool our heels until the Liberator gets back, and that won't be for some time."

Lunch was taken in moody silence. Biggles went to his " office " with Bill to study the photographs Bertie had taken, and which had now been developed. There, presently, he was joined by Rex Larrymore.

"I hope you don't mind me butting in," said Rex, "but I've been thinking. Suppose you do get delivery of an amphibian, or a marine aircraft of some sort. What would you do ? "

"Try to get on the island—naturally. I wouldn't abandon any officer without making every possible attempt at rescue ; but it happens that the two missing officers are my best friends, and that makes the thing, from my point of view, even more tragic. I'd take any risk to get them

back."

"Of course, I realize that. But I've had more experience in this part of the world than you have, so I've come to offer a spot of advice."

"I'm always willing to accept advice from anybody who knows more about a thing than I do."

"Very well. I know these islands. They're bad medicine for white men."

"What are you trying to tell me, Rex ? Do you think I shall only make matters worse by blundering about in the jungle ? "

"Frankly, I don't think you'd do much good by yourself In these infernal jungles it isn't a matter of courage it's a matter of knowing what's what. That's where the natives score."

"What are you suggesting ? "

"I'm suggesting that if you get a biggish aircraft, and decide to raid the island in the hope of rescuing Algy and Ginger, you might do worse than take Suba along."

Biggles stared. "Arc you serious ? "

"Certainly."

"Head-hunters and aeroplanes seem a queer combination to me. Naturally, I'd ask nothing more than to have an experienced hunter like Suba in the party, but do you think he'd get in an aeroplane ? "

"Oh, yes, he'd go with you—particularly if he thought there were a few heads to be picked up. These savages are queer birds. Their brains don't work as ours do. Everything a white man has is marvellous, and there it ends. To Suba, a box of matches or a pretty necktie is just as much an object of wonder as an aeroplane. Remember, an aircraft is no novelty to him. When I first landed here he looked a bit scared of my machine, but as soon as he was satisfied that it didn't bite he had no further interest in it. My revolver excited him far more because it would kill at a distance, and to the Punans anything that kills is the cat's whisker."

"All right," agreed Biggles, smiling. "Let's wait and see if we get an amphibian. If we do, you can ask him how he feels about joining the white men in a hunting trip."

"Okay. Suppose Algy and Ginger are no longer on the island ? "

"The ideal thing would be to get hold of a prisoner and make him talk. Everyone on the island must know about the two Britishers landing. They must know if they are still there, or, alternatively, where they have gone."

Rex looked doubtful. " Suba won't think much of the idea of taking prisoners, I'm afraid ; he takes their heads—then he knows they're safe beyond any further argument. But I'll try to explain the position to him."

"Do you speak Japanese ? "

"A little. One is bound to learn a certain amount of Japanese, and Chinese, if one spends any length of time in the Far East. Jackson probably speaks the language fluently. Why ?

"

I was thinking it wouldn't be much good getting a prisoner who couldn't speak English, if one couldn't speak his language. Information is what we want."

Rex nodded. "I see that. When do you expect the Liberator back ? "

"Not before midnight. It might arrive any time after then, but if there is a delay at Darwin it might not get back until to-morrow."

"I take it that if you raid the island it would be after dark ? "

"It would be crazy to try to land unobserved in broad daylight."

"That's what I thought. I just wanted to get an idea of the lines on which you are thinking, so that I can make the position clear to Suba."

Biggles's calculations concerning the return of the Liberator were not far out. It was about x a.m. when a roar of engines announced its arrival. Instantly the aerodrome buzzed with activity as a flare path was made. The big bomber came in, and taxied quickly to the end of the runway. The reason for this was made apparent when another big machine followed it down. It looked like a flying-boat on wheels.

"By gosh, they've got it ! " cried Biggles.

It turned out to be a twin-engined Cayman, originally a twelve-seater

passenger plane.

Ferocity had flown it, following Angus in the Liberator, which brought back with it Jackson and Henry Harcourt.

As soon as the ground staff had been set to work to unload the fully laden Liberator, Biggles called a meeting of all officers, which included Rex, Jackson and the two Americans. First, he asked Angus what the British and American authorities in Australia had had to say.

"I had no trouble at all," announced Angus. "Losh ! The Yanks certainly got a move-on when they heard we'd picked up a couple of their boys and might get more. They'd have given me a fleet of ships if I'd asked for them. The British A.O.C. was okay, too. He is working hand in glove with Air Commodore Raymond of the Air Ministry. There are no special orders. It's left to you to do entirely as you think best. They would like to be kept informed as to how things go."

"That's fine," declared Biggles. "Now we can go ahead." He went on to explain, for the benefit of the new arrivals, what had happened, and the steps he proposed to take. "First, I'm going to try to find out what has become of Algy and Ginger. The Cayman should make that possible." He turned to Rex. "Did you speak to Suba about the trip ? "

"Yes. He's tickled to death about it—done himself up in his special war paint. He'd like to take his special hunting pal with him."

"Good. As you are the only one who speaks his language I'm afraid you'll have to come too—if you will ? "

"That suits me."

Biggles turned to Jackson. "I should like you to come along. I shall need an interpreter if we get a prisoner."

"Count on me," said Jackson.

Biggles thought for a moment. "That's four—five including myself. I ought to have a spare pilot in case of accidents. Bertie, would you like to join the party ? "

"What-ho ! Not half."

"That should be enough," said Biggles. "Angus, you'll take charge here in my absence."

We must keep the Liberator on the move to Australia or we shall be running out of fuel.

Taffy, you'd better take her this time. Get away as soon as you like—make it before dawn. Tex and Tug will act as gunners—that is, if Tug's wrist is up to it."

"It'll do," announced Tug.

"Good. That will give the others a chance to rest. All right. The Cayman should have been refuelled by now. We've no time to lose if we're going to get this job finished by daylight. All those on the show will muster at the machine in five minutes. Rex, you get hold of Suba. You'd better draw a revolver from store. We may need weapons."

Five minutes later Biggles took his place at the control column of the Cayman. Bertie sat beside him. Rex Larrymore and Jackson sat in the cabin with the two natives who, armed with kriss and blowpipes, looked singularly out of place. The engines roared ; the aircraft moved up the runway and, gathering speed, rose into the star-spangled sky.

Visibility, helped by the light of a moon now nearly full, was good. With Borneo a vast, black, shapeless mass below, Biggles raised his wheels, which would not be required, and climbing steadily, headed for the distant objective.

The journey was made in silence. There was nothing to say. Bertie dozed, but even in that condition must have more or less kept pace with the situation, for after an hour he sat up and yawned.

"Must be getting closeish—what ? "

"Another five minutes," answered Biggles, and cutting his engines, put the Cayman in a shallow dive.

The first, and perhaps greatest, difficulty was to make a landing on the island unobserved. Biggles had little fear of being seen, but he was afraid he might be heard, which was his reason for climbing high and cutting his engines while still some miles from the objective. Even so, a gliding aircraft makes a certain amount of noise.

Fortunately the island was a fairly large one, being about four miles in length and two in breadth, so he took the extra precaution of landing on the water at the end of the island farthest from the cove where he had seen signs of occupation.

The actual landing on the water was an anxious moment, for there was always a danger of striking a hidden reef. However, the landing was made without mishap, and the Cayman finished its run on calm water some fifty yards from a sandy beach. Biggles sat for a little while watching the beach, but seeing no movement, he lowered the anchor and prepared to go ashore.

"You'll have to stay and look after the machine," he told Bertie. "We daren't risk leaving it untended."

"Bit of a bore, what ? " murmured Bertie.

"You keep your eyes open," warned Biggles. "We don't want to come back and find the tail chewed off by crocodiles or something."

The actual landing was then made in the rubber dinghy which is standard equipment in all big marine

aircraft. The dinghy was pulled up on the beach and Biggles turned to his strangely assorted comrades.

"I'm going to lead the way to the cove where I saw men moving this morning," he said. "

It's about three miles. I shall, of course, halt some distance away, because there's bound to be somebody on guard. When we get to within sight of the place I propose, with your help, Rex, to point it out to Suba, and then be guided by him. Whatever happens we ought to be away by dawn."

"I understand," answered Rex, and the party moved forward, with the two natives reconnoitring ahead.

It took an hour to reach a point from which the cove could be pointed out. This was from the top of a natural breakwater of boulders which had at some time fallen from the hills that backed the beach. So far they had seen no one, heard no one.

Biggles turned to Rex. "This is it. Tell Suba that our enemies are in or near that cove. We think they are yellow men, but we don't know how many there are. The two white men whom they know may be prisoners there. That is what we want to find out. If necessary we must get a prisoner and question him. Ask Suba what he suggests."

Rex had a brief conversation with the chief, who seemed emphatic about something, and then turned back to Biggles.

"He says it's no use white men going. They make too much noise. He and Kalut—that's his friend—will go alone. They will find out everything and come back."

Biggles nodded. "All right. Tell them to go ahead. We'll wait here."

The two natives disappeared like shadows into the undergrowth that fringed the beach. The others, with their weapons ready in case they were needed, moved up to the shadow of the jungle and sat down to wait. It seemed a long time. The mosquitoes were ferocious. Strange noises came out of the jungle, where Nature hunted and was hunted.

Biggles was beginning to get impatient, fearing that something had gone wrong, when Suba and Kalut materialized silently out of the darkness. They carried a large object between them.

"Here they are," whispered Rex. "By thunder ! They've got a prisoner, too."

This was correct. The prisoner was a Japanese soldier. He was conscious, but speechless with terror—as he had good reason to be, having been snatched from his post by unseen hands. Suba fingered the edge of his kriss thoughtfully as he looked at him.

"Let us hear what Suba has to say," suggested Biggles.

Rex translated. "He says there are many men sleeping in a long hut built of bamboo.

There is a hut with many boxes, and cans like those we have at Lucky Strike. From this description I should say they are oil cans. It looks as if this place is a refuelling station for submarines."

"Yes, I think that's pretty clear. What about the white men ? "

" Suba says they aren't there. There are only two huts and he looked into both of them, having first grabbed the sentry. As you wanted a prisoner, with great forbearance they refrained from cutting his head Off."

"Tell Suba he has done well," said Biggles. "Jackson, you speak to the Japanese. Ask him what happened to the two white men who landed here this morning. Tell him to speak the truth or I'll let the natives cut

his head off."

Rex spoke to the Jap, who answered readily. He turned back to Biggles. "I'm afraid it's bad news."

" Well ? "

"They were captured. The submarine was here. The commander spoke to his base by radio, and was ordered to take the prisoners to Cotabato, on Mindanao. God help them if Yashnowada is still there. I was a prisoner there myself, so I know what I'm talking about."

Biggles was silent for a moment. "That's what we came to find out. I was afraid of it."

"There's nothing more we can do to-night. It'll be getting light presently. We'd better see about getting back."

"What about the prisoner ? "

"We shall have to take him along with us. He's seen too much for us to let him go."

Moreover, we may want to ask him more questions. When we've finished with him we can ship him to Australia in the Liberator."

They began the return journey to the aircraft. It was still where they had left it. Bertie was waiting. Dawn was staining the eastern sky with gold as the Cayman took off and headed back to its secret base.

CHAPTER VIII

EVENTS AT COTABATO

AS far as Algy and Ginger were concerned, there was only one spark of light in a very gloomy outlook. They had not been separated. They had been taken, as they supposed they would be, to the notorious prison camp, which was not so much a prisoner-of-war camp on the lines usually adopted by civilized nations, as a concentration camp in which were herded indiscriminately civilians, soldiers, sailors and airmen of many nationalities.

The British subjects included a Sikh policeman, some Indian traders, Burmese and Malays. There were several Chinese, ranging from the lowest coolies to elderly business men who had been in business in the islands. There were also several Philipinos. These various people had

naturally sorted themselves into groups as far as the limited space of the compound would permit.

The actual sleeping quarters had once been the civil prison, which had never been intended to hold so many prisoners. It was an isolated building. Around it had been constructed a square barbed-wire cage embracing perhaps half an acre of ground. This cage was patrolled outside the wire by sentries armed with rifles and fixed bayonets.

Most of the prisoners were free to walk about the compound if they wished, and in spite of the lateness of the hour most of them preferred the comparatively clean air outside the building to the foul air inside. Algy and Ginger were turned in with the crowd.

They were at once greeted by the white prisoners, who demanded eagerly to be told what was happening in the world, for the only information they received was from the Japanese, and this, obviously, was not to be trusted. Ginger was appalled by the state of most of these men. Their hair was long, they were unshaven, and their clothes, originally white or khaki drill, were stained, torn and creased. They looked as if they hadn't washed for weeks, which was indeed the case—no facilities having been provided by their captors.

Algy gave them a brief outline of how the war was

going. As far as he and Ginger were concerned, he merely said they were British airmen who had been shot down, and made no mention of their particular circumstances. Nor did he reveal the fact that Jackson and the two Americans who had been prisoners in the same camp had succeeded in reaching comparative safety.

As soon as the excitement caused by the arrival of the new prisoners and died down, the comrades found a place near the wire where they could talk without being overheard.

"We are certainly in a mess," muttered Algy. "You're telling me," answered Ginger bitterly. "What are we going to do about it ? "

"I don't see that we can do anything about it." "Jackson and the two Americans managed to get out."

"That's right—so they did. Goodness knows how they did it. Anyway, the Japs will see to it that no one else escapes the same way. There seems to be only one gate in the wire, and two sentries stand guard over it. There's no way of getting through the wire anywhere else except by cutting it, and that would need cutters, which we haven't

got—

and are not likely to get. By the way, General Barton was supposed to be here. Suppose we find him and hear what he has to say ? "

"Yes, we might do that," agreed Ginger.

After making inquiries, they found the American general, not looking much like a general, asleep on the ground in a quiet corner of the compound. They woke him up and introduced themselves. The general greeted them with reassuring sincerity, whereupon Algy, speaking quietly, told him that Jackson, Bill Gray and Pat Flannagan had succeeded in reaching a British base. The general was delighted.

"Lucky beggars," he remarked.

"We were wondering if there is any possible way of getting out of this hole," resumed Algy. "You have been here for some time, so you must know how the land lies."

The general shook his head. "Not a chance," he replied wearily. "A few people got out early on, with the result that the Japs have tightened things up. How did you boys get here ? "

Algy told him.

The general looked serious. "I'm afraid you're going to have a bad time. No one knows how rumours start, but the islands are buzzing with a tale of a secret British squadron operating from Borneo. Yashnowada—he's the boss here—has got scouts out looking for this base. He's a devil. He'll guess you are members of the squadron, and now that you have fallen into his hands he'll practise on you every devilment that he knows—and he knows most of them—to make you speak."

"Yes, we're prepared for that," murmured Algy.

"By the way, sir," put in Ginger, "is it true that there is an ammunition dump here ? We were told there was one. I ask because if there is one here it is likely to be bombed."

"The main Japanese dump is here," declared the general. "They've been accumulating stores, oil and ammunition, for months. It's right here beside us, a couple of hundred yards away, near the waterfront."

"If we could get out we might do a good job by blowing it up."

"You've got to get out first, son, and if you can find a way you're cleverer than I am. You can't get through wire without cutters."

Algy spoke. "By the way, sir, where are the two ladies, reported to be here ? "

"They're penned in a house on the hillside. I haven't seen the place."

"You seem to hear quite a lot about what is going on outside."

"That's mostly because the Philippino prisoners have friends outside. They know everything that's going on. Don't ask me how they know, but they do. It's probably drum talk. We often hear drums on the hills, where many of the natives have found refuge. Of course, the Japs have tried to round them up, but it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. The drums were going a little while ago. I fancy there's something going on now. Take a look at those brown guys over there." The general pointed. "They're tough little guys at that," he added. "It didn't need us to teach them how to fight. We only gave them modern weapons, and as you may have heard, they put up a swell show before the islands were captured."

Ginger looked. At first he could see nothing unusual ; then he realized what the general meant. Singly, and in twos and threes, the natives were drifting together until they stood in little groups. The movement was so unobtrusive that had it not been pointed out to him Ginger would not have noticed it. One of the natives strolled towards the general.

" Ah-huh ! Here comes the news," murmured General Barton.

The Philippino drifted up, rather than walked directly.

"White men come," he said in a low voice.

The general glanced at Algy. "There you are ! What did I tell you ? "

"Arc you sure he's not making a mistake ? " asked Ginger.

"These fellows are never wrong."

The Philippino spoke again. "Watch for message from the sky."

That must be aircraft," said Ginger excitedly.

Again the native spoke. "Everyone be ready. All prisoner come this side. Dump, she go bang pretty soon." The Philippino drifted away

towards the far side of the compound, and Ginger noticed that there was a general movement in that direction.

"Gosh I This is uncanny," muttered Ginger. "What do you make of it, sir ? "

"I should say something's going to happen. We'd better do as he says. When I first came to the islands years ago I used to laugh at these native tales—but I know better now."

Ginger was conscious of a strange tenseness in the atmosphere, although there was nothing definite to which this could be attributed. Nobody did anything unusual. A few men who had been inside the prison came out, that was all, but there was a brittle, attentive quality in the moonlit silence. It was like the silence that falls before a thunderstorm.

"We'd better go across." The general walked over to the far side of the compound and stood near the wire. Algy and Ginger went with him.

Said Ginger to Algy, "Do you think Biggles could be behind this ? "

"I don't see how he could be," replied Algy. "It couldn't be on account of us, surely, because I can't imagine how he could know we are here."

"He's a wizard at finding things out, all the same," returned Ginger. Then he gripped Algy's arm. "Hark!"

From somewhere in the intangible darkness overhead, or nearly overhead, had come a faint pop.

"If that wasn't an engine misfiring I'll cat my boots," promised Ginger.

"Sounded like it," agreed Algy.

At that moment the star-shell burst.

It burst almost immediately overhead—although burst might not be the exact word.

There was no sound. A light appeared in the sky, a white glowing ball of incandescent flame from which drifted a faint trail of smoke. The light gleamed faintly on the rim of a parachute from which it was suspended.

"Parachute flare," muttered Ginger, blinking in the brilliant, almost blinding radiance.

Everything on the ground was revealed as clearly as though the sun had suddenly taken the place of the moon. Within the compound everyone stood still, staring upwards.

"Now what ? " murmured Algy.

Even as he spoke the silence that had followed the appearance of the flare was shattered by the roar of aero engines. And thereafter so many things happened, and happened so fast, that Ginger was for a few moments completely bewildered.

The Japanese sentries shouted. Whistles blew. A bell, evidently used as an air-raid warning, clanged. Above all these sounds now came one which, once heard, is never forgotten. It was the crescendo scream of falling bombs.

"Hold your hat, General ! Here they come ! " shouted Algy.

"By thunder ! They're coming close, too," gasped Ginger, as he flung himself flat.

The stick of bombs burst in swift succession. The ground rocked. Flames leaped.

Splinters flew. As the roar of the explosions died away, more bombs could be heard coming ; and with the sound came another, one which puzzled Ginger not a little. It was the howl of low-flying aircraft travelling at high speed. He couldn't understand it. The bombing was being done from a low altitude, that was obvious, but not so low as the approaching machines, which, in any case, were coming in from a different direction.

" Beaufighters ! " shouted Algy. "I know the song they sing!"

Then more bombs burst. Others were screaming down. The roar of the low-flying planes became a terrific sensation rather than a sound. A dark shape, like the shadow of death itself, swooped low, and tore across the compound with more noise than seemed possible. Something struck the ground with a crash. Ginger winced and, clenching his teeth, waited for the expected explosion. Not unnaturally he thought it was a bomb.

Then someone shouted. He saw Algy jump up and run towards the middle of the compound, saw him stoop and lift what looked like a sack. Most of the white men ran towards him. By the time Ginger

reached the spot he was emptying a bag. Out tumbled revolvers, an axe and two pairs of wire-cutters. Out, too, fell a large yellow envelope.

Algy ripped it open and took out a single sheet of paper. He read the message aloud. It did not take long :

"Cut your way out and take the road up the hill. B."

Who knows the road up the hill ? " shouted Algy at the top of his voice.

It was necessary to shout in order to be heard, for by this time the noise baffled description. There seemed to be several machines in the air. Machine-guns were hammering, cannon-shells bursting, and tracer bullets flying in all directions. Anti-aircraft guns were firing, while all around fires were blazing.

Several voices answered Algy's inquiry, but before he could make top or tail of the clamour—for by this

time everyone was in a state of high excitement—there came an explosion that knocked everyone flat.

"It's the dump I" shouted the general. "They've got the dump."

Algy jumped up. "All white men grab a weapon and follow me ! " he shouted. "Keep your heads, and stay together."

With a pair of wire-cutters in one hand and a revolver in the other, Algy ran to the wire.

A Japanese sentry came running. Several shots were fired at him and he fell. He seemed to be the only one. Ginger supposed vaguely that the others had either taken cover or had gone to the fires. He was not surprised that no one appeared to be concerned about the prisoners, for the town was now in a state of complete pandemonium.

"Ginger, you stick with me ! " shouted Algy, as his cutters bit into the wire. "And you, General," he added.

In three minutes a gap had been cut through the wire.

Ginger turned to face the crowd of people behind him. "Keep calm ! " he roared. "Keep together. Someone lead the way up the hill."

Actually the words did not come as smoothly as that, because the

dump was on fire and the earth shook with sporadic explosions. Small arms ammunition was crackling like a thousand castanets.

A tall Australian pushed his way to the front. "I know the hill. I'll lead the way," he offered.

"Lead on," said Algy. "Don't stop for anything."

At this juncture apparently someone noticed that the prisoners were outside the compound. Several Japanese soldiers 'appeared, not an organized body, but a number of individuals. In fact, nobody seemed to be in charge

of anything. Men could be seen running to and from the many fires.

Ginger, Algy and General Barton followed the Australian at the head of a straggling column. Just where they were going, beyond the obvious fact that they were mounting a



*"Ginger, you stick with me!" shouted Algy, as his cutters
bit into the wire.*

hill, Ginger did not know. The whole thing was taking the form of a distorted nightmare.

Shots were being fired. He saw some of the Japanese fall. Others ran, shouting, presumably for assistance.

At first, when the refugees had started to climb the hill, there had been houses on either side, but these now gave way to open country

and jungle. There was no more bombing, and the drone of aircraft had stopped, but the dump was still grumbling, sometimes breaking into violent explosions. Fires still blazed, and the sky was crimson with the glare.

Presently Ginger saw a man sitting on a large boulder beside the road. It was a white man. He was smoking a cigarette. The lurid glare glinted on an eyeglass. The man got up.

He spoke.

"I say, is that you, Ginger, old boy ? "

" Bertie ! " shouted Ginger, laughing. "What do you think you're doing ? "

"Been watching the fireworks. Jolly good show—what ? " answered Bertie. "I say," he went on, "that's a pretty wild-looking mob you've picked up—if you see what I mean ?

Quite a party—quite a party. By the way, have you seen Jackson, or Rex, or our cannibal comrade, Suba ? "

By this time Algy had pushed to the front, and by holding up his arms managed to stop the procession.

"No, we haven't seen anyone," he said. "Where is Jackson supposed to be ? "

"He's gone to get his girl—at least, that's what the silly ass told me. Pretty formidable proposition, should say—what ? "

"Where's Biggles ? "

"He's directing- the jolly old operation. I was told to stay here until you came and then take you to the boat."

"Then what the dickens are we standing here talking for ? "

"No hurry, old boy, no hurry—we're not after a beastly fox, you know."

"What am I supposed to do with all these people ? "

Bertie considered them through his eyeglass. "Dashed if I know, laddie. Pretty big handful—what ? Shady-looking lot of coves, too. Perhaps Biggles will work it out. It's time he was here. He said he'd be along. Rex should be here, too. He went for a stroll in the woods with Suba and a drum. I like this drum stuff. I wish I could do it. Ah 1 Who do I see coming ? The big white chief himself, no less."

Ginger turned, and looking down the road, saw Biggles coming up the hill. Close behind him was Jackson and two white women. They were all running.

Biggles arrived first. His face was streaked with dust and perspiration. "Glad you could make it," he panted. "No time to talk now. The Japs are beginning to get over the shock. I saw some of them remustering. Has Rex arrived yet ? "

"Here he comes now, with Suba," said Ginger, as he saw them emerge from the jungle and hurry towards the party.

"Good. Everyone fall in behind me and try to keep some sort of order."

They all trooped along the road.

Ginger's head was still in a whirl. He tried to work

out what Biggles intended doing with so many refugees, but he gave it up. Presently Biggles took a side turning, a lane that sloped steeply towards a narrow arm of the sea, which could be seen at no great distance. In ten minutes they had reached what turned out to be the estuary of a small river, flanked by dismal-looking mangroves, and there Biggles called a halt.

"Now," he said, "let us try to sort things out. Queer things happen in war, but this time we have certainly picked up some strange companions. How many people are there in your party, Algy ? "

"I didn't count them, but I should say getting on for forty."

"That's about the number Jackson reckoned. Somehow we've got to get them away.

Naturally, I couldn't just rescue you and Ginger and leave the others there. We've little time for introductions now, but I'd like to meet the general."

General Barton came forward.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Biggles. "You understand we can't linger here talking, because the Japs will be on our trail by now ? "

The general agreed. "Go right ahead—don't mind me."

"Jackson, I'll leave you to take care of the ladies."

"I'm looking after them," answered Jackson.

Biggles then addressed the crowd. "Listen to me, everyone," he called. "If some of you do not speak English, you must get the others to translate. I'm trying to get you away, so I want you to do exactly as you are told. In the mangrove swamp which you can see I have an aircraft on the water. It won't hold you all, so what I propose to do is this. I have been able to get hold of a small pearling lugger, the property of a local friend of Mr.

Jackson's. Those who want to leave Mindanao will get in the lugger in an orderly manner and sit down. I shall take it in tow behind the aircraft to an island which I have selected, one that we should be able to reach before daylight. More than that I can't do for the present,

because as soon as it is light enemy planes will be in the sky looking for us.

When I cast you off at the island you must keep hidden until nightfall, when I hope to return and transport you all to safer quarters. Hurry along now, but keep in order. There is no need for panic."

Biggles turned and walked along a narrow path that followed the shore. It ended in the mangrove swamp, where it became necessary to climb over the roots of trees to the amphibian, which was on the seaward side. Angus Mackail was standing by it. Beside the aircraft rode the lugger to which Biggles had referred.

Ginger spoke to Biggles. "Aren't you taking a chance, towing a load like this ? "

"I don't think so," answered Biggles. "I don't see why a flying-boat shouldn't tow a surface craft. The strain will be getting on the move ; after that it should be easy. I couldn't do it if a sea was running, of course, but it happens to be dead calm."

Biggles stood and sorted out the refugees as they came along in single file, directing them into the lugger, or the amphibian, as he decided. First, the two white women were passed along to Angus, who saw them into the machine. General Barton, Rex, Jackson and Suba went next. Algy, Ginger and two men who had been wounded — one of them an elderly Chinese — made up the load. "Everyone else in the boat," called Biggles.

In a few minutes everyone was aboard. Biggles climbed into the Cayman and took the controls. The

engines started, and the aircraft moved towards the open sea. A tow-line between it and the lugger was drawn taut, the amphibian bucking a little as it took the strain. A little toying with the throttle eased this, and as the lugger picked up speed there was no more trouble. The two vessels ploughed away across the placid sea.

CHAPTER IX

VISITORS AT LUCKY STRIKE

THE Cayman and its trailer secured nearly two hours' start before dawn came to make further progress

unsafe. More than once the two vessels had been forced to seek the

shadows of the islands as the drone of aircraft warned them that the hunt was on.

At the first faint streak of dawn Biggles made for one of the smaller islands, and in a narrow creek explained the situation to the refugees. He pointed out the obvious danger of trying to go on as they were, and promised to return at the earliest possible moment.

Putting the tall Australian in charge of the party which would necessarily have to be abandoned for the time being, he advised him to sink the lugger and keep close under cover. This the Australian promised to do.

The Cayman then proceeded on its way—now, of course, in the air. Biggles, at the controls, was a good deal more worried than he would have cared to confess, for he knew that if he was seen by hostile aircraft his plight would be precarious. The Cayman, being unarmed, could only seek safety in sheer speed, and for this reason he kept close to the water, avoiding islands that might be in enemy occupation and in radio communication with Cotabato.

As he flew he watched the sky ahead, not only for hostile aircraft, but for the two Beaufighters which he had ordered to come to meet him, to act as escort. It happened that the Beaufighters arrived simultaneously with an enemy flying-boat. Biggles was content to leave them to settle the affair, and presently Ginger reported that the Japanese aircraft had been shot down. Shortly afterwards the Beaufighters roared up alongside and escorted the Cayman to its base, which it reached without interference.

Biggles was tired. They all were. He had every reason to be glad that the operation had turned out successfully, but he felt that his command was getting out of hand. It had never been his intention to carry out rescue-work on a big scale, but he had been the victim of circumstances beyond his control. His main concern was to get rid of his guests as soon as possible. The only way he could do this was by sending them to Australia in the Liberator. Meanwhile, more than thirty people had been left stranded on the island, and these he was in honour bound to pick up.

"We aren't a fighting unit any longer," he told his officers bitterly. "We're a blooming transport company. We can't go on like this—but what else could I do ? I couldn't have rescued Algy and Ginger, yet left all those other people to the tender mercies of that brute Yashnowada.

Apart from the food question, which is going to be difficult with all these mouths to feed, I'm worried about petrol. If we run out of juice, and we certainly shall if we go on like this, we shall be in a mess. The Cayman will have to make three trips to the island to pick up all those people, and the Beaufighters will probably have to act as escort. Then the Liberator will have to make two trips to Australia to get the crowd there. Frankly, I don't like all these people about, nor am I pleased at having to do so much flying. With a regular passenger service running

for that's what it amounts to—the Japs will soon learn where we are."

Naturally, Algy and Ginger were anxious to know how Biggles had found out where they were, and how the rescue operation had been organized. Biggles told them about his trip to the island where the prisoner had been captured. From the prisoner it had been learned that they had been taken to Cotabato. The rest was fairly straightforward. The Liberator, the Cayman and both Beaufighters had been employed. First, the Cayman had landed in a lonely creek near Cotabato, putting ashore Biggles, Jackson, Bertie and Suba, who all had separate jobs to do. Jackson, naturally, was given the task of rescuing the two white women. Suba it was who conveyed the message to the compound by means of drum talk.

The Liberator, supported by the two Beau-fighters, had made the low bombing attack to destroy the dump and at the same time cause confusion, during which the prisoners were to be rescued. The whole operation had required careful timing, but it had worked out according to plan.

"But that's past and done with," concluded Biggles. "What we have to do now is clean up and get back to normal as quickly as possible."

Actually, things turned out rather better than Biggles expected. The Cayman made another trip to the island without mishap and the Liberator left for Australia with its first load. It came back in company with two more Liberators, flown by members of the Royal Australian Air Force. All these machines were loaded to capacity with oil and petrol, which relieved Biggles's anxiety to no small extent. By this time the remainder of the escaped prisoners had been fetched from the island by the Cayman, and the two extra Liberators were able to transport them to Australia. Jackson, Bill Gray and Flannagan remained at Lucky Strike, having expressed a wish to do so. Algy went to Australia as passenger in one of the Australian Liberators and brought back a Beaufighter to replace the one they had lost. Thus by

the end of three days the unit had been restored to its original strength, and all that remained was for the overworked pilots to get some rest before resuming active duties. At least, such was Biggles's intention.

"Well, that's all very satisfactory," he told Algy. "When I submit my report on the operation, remind me to call attention to the outstanding work done by Suba. He ought to get a medal."

"He'd probably prefer a tin of sardines," opined Rex dryly.

"Then give him a couple of tins with the compliments of the British Government,"

ordered Biggles, smiling. "I'm beginning to like Suba. In country like this he's of more use than a squadron of tanks."

So things settled down, and Biggles was planning his next sortie when an unexpected diversion occurred. The Liberator had gone to Australia ; the Cayman and the three Beaufighters were comfortably housed in their ferny bough shelters ; the false dawn was glowing faintly in the east, and Lucky Strike lay silent under a waning moon, resting.

Biggles awoke, and on the instant was wide awake, listening. Another moment and he was out of his hammock, pulling on high mosquito boots, and calling to Algy and Ginger who shared the next cabin.

"We've got a visitor," he announced, and sprinted for Flight Sergeant Smyth's quarters. "

Keep everyone under cover," he ordered, and then ran on to Rex. "Rex, there's an aircraft prowling about. Find Suba and tell him to keep his boys under the trees. One sign of movement might be enough to give us away."

"Can it be the Liberator come back ? " asked Rex.

"No," declared Biggles emphatically, and went to the fringe of the palms.

Looking up, he saw the aircraft at once. It was a flying-boat, cruising in wide circles at about ten thousand feet. As he watched, officers began to join him in various stages of dress—or, perhaps, undress.

"What do you make of it ? " asked Algy. "I suppose it's a Jap ? "

"Looks to me like a Mitsubishi Navy H-96 . . . reconnaissance bomber . . . three-engined job, carries a crew of six."

"What do you suppose he's doing ? "

"He's obviously looking for something, and as I can't think of anything else he'd be looking for in this part of the island, I should say he's looking for us. The rumour has gone round by now that we're operating from central Borneo, and Yashnowada is probably using everything he's got to locate us. Judging by that fellow's turns he's having a thundering good look at our landingground—no doubt because it's the only open space for miles."

"Ah-ha," murmured Algy as the drone of the flying-boat's engines died away. "He's coming down for a closer inspection."

"Keep under cover, everybody I" shouted Biggles. "I don't think we've much to worry about," remarked Ginger. "Don't forget that from topsides this place looks like water—

like a lake. Yashnowada must know that we are flying Beaus—the submarine commander would tell him that, as he saw one crash. Beaus don't land on water, so why should that fellow upstairs think we're here ? "

"He must know we've also got a marine aircraft," muttered Biggles. "We couldn't have landed at Cotabato any other way. Apart from that, he's probably having a good look at everything and anything that will hold a plane of any sort."

The flying-boat came lower, an object of intense interest to the watchers on the ground, who could now see the Rising Sun insignia on the wings. Round and round it swung in wide circles until its purpose was no longer in doubt. The pilot and crew were studying the landing-ground.

"How about going up and giving him a squirt ? " suggested Ginger impatiently.

"If I was sure we'd get him, I would," agreed Biggles, "but I'm afraid he'd spot us the moment we tried to get a Beau out, and be away before we could get to him. We should look silly if he got home to tell the tale. Tempting though the target is, our best plan is to lie low."

At length the big machine turned away as if, its curiosity satisfied, it intended to depart.

Biggles gave a sigh of relief, and was about to walk back to his quarters when the flying-boat turned again, and cutting its engines, came gliding back.

For a moment Biggles stared in surprise. Then, as the truth struck him, he let out a startled cry.

"Look out ! " he shouted. "It's going to land ! "

Ginger wondered why he had not thought of the possibility, for after all, the grey surface of the aerodrome did look like water, and that being the case, it was not outside the bounds of chance that the aircraft would land to make a thorough investigation of the supposed lake.

Meanwhile, the flying-boat came gliding in on idling engines. No one spoke. Everyone stood tense, by no means sure of what would happen, for the spectacle of a big flying-boat landing on solid ground has rarely been presented.

"Get ready to duck if it changes course, or tries to get off again," snapped Biggles. "If that ten tons of metal hits the carpet there's going to be a shower of nuts and bolts."

Actually, the crash did not occur as the spectators supposed it would. There was a rasping, shuddering crash as the keel tore a great scar in the moss-encrusted rock. The nose bounced up, automatically causing the tail unit to strike the ground with even greater violence. At this juncture the pilot must have realized his error, and decided to try to get off again, for the engines came to life with a roar. The three whirling airscrews succeeded in lifting the nose by sheer power, but—this could only be surmised—the damage done to the tail had either affected the controls or fractured the elevators. At any rate, for perhaps ten seconds the aircraft roared along like a mortally wounded bird, dragging its useless tail—a sight that brought a gasp of horror from the watching airmen, for it was obvious that no power on earth could save the machine from disaster. The pilot did the only thing left for him to do. He cut his engines. The effect was instantaneous.

The flying-boat crashed back to earth, striking the ground a bare hundred yards from where the spellbound British airmen stood.

Even before it struck Biggles was racing towards it, his first instinct as a pilot being to save the crew if possible. But there was no question of that. Simultaneously with the crash came a burst of flame, a flame that grew and spread and leapt with a roar like distant thunder. A

mighty column of black smoke swirled high into the air.

Biggles backed away, breaking into a run as small-arms ammunition began to explode, flinging bullets in all directions. There was nothing he could do. He knew beyond all doubt that the enemy airmen were past help. Pale, he returned to the others. A burning aircraft, even though it is an enemy machine, is not a pretty sight.

But this, apparently, was not the view of the natives who, with barbaric yells of joy, now broke from cover and raced towards the wreck.

Biggles stormed. "Rex, for heaven's sake get those fools back under the trees ! "

Rex shrugged his shoulders. "When they're in the state they're in now they won't take any notice of me."

"Then find Suba."

"He's with them."

The crazy fool ! Tell him there may be bombs on board. If they explode the whole tribe will be blasted to eternity."

"I'll do what I can."

Rex started running towards the wreck, which by this time was surrounded by a wide circle of howling natives. Biggles followed him.

They had almost reached the machine when above the noise of the fire and the shouting came another. Looking in the direction of the sound, Biggles saw a machine diving towards the landing-ground. In a flash it had come and gone. Zooming high after its dive, it banked steeply and sped away towards the northeast.

Biggles threw up his hands in impotent anger. "After all my trouble to keep this place secret ! " he said bitterly.

"Why, what was it ? " asked Rex, with some concern.

"A Nakajima fighter."

"The pilot must have seen the smoke."

"Of course he did," snapped Biggles. "It was bad enough that he should see the crash, but what is worse, he must have seen us. Now he's gone

home like a bat out of Hades to spread the news. I'm not usually pessimistic, but I'm afraid we're in for trouble. There's nothing we can do about it now, so I'll get all hands clearing up this mess."

CHAPTER X

FEE WONG COMES BACK

A N hour after the Nakajima had disappeared a third

aircraft arrived over Lucky Strike. This time it was a British machine, an amphibian of the well-known Saro Cloud type.

"For the love of Mike ! " groaned Biggles. "This place was going-to be a dead secret.

Why, it's getting more traffic than a perishing terminal airport. I feel like giving up."

With feet apart and arms folded across his chest, he watched the Cloud land and taxi to the occupied end of the runway.

There emerged from it three men. The first was an officer of the Royal Air Force whose badges of rank proclaimed him to be a wing-commander. He was a stranger to Biggles.

The second was a Chinese in a tattered blue robe and black skull cap. The third was a flight-lieutenant of the Royal Australian Air Force, evidently the pilot.

"There was a time," murmured Biggles sadly to Algy, "when you could make a guess as to who was going to step out of an aeroplane, but I'm dashed if you can any longer."

"What do these people want, I wonder ? " said Algy curiously.

"Don't waste your time wondering—you'd never guess," answered Biggles sarcastically.

"Most Chinamen look alike to me," he added, "but I've got an idea I've seen that chap in the blue nightshirt before. Surely he was one of the people we rescued from Cotabato ? "

The three visitors walked up to Biggles, the R.A.F. officer leading. He held out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Bigglesworth," he said. "I'm Crane—Liaison Intelligence in Australia." He jerked his thumb towards the crash on which a number of airmen and natives were working. "I see you've had a crack-up ? "

"Not us, thank goodness," replied Biggles. "A Jap decided to call, but as you see he tripped over the step. We shall soon be having some crashes, though, if this place is going to be turned into a public airport."

The wing-commander smiled sympathetically. "Sorry, but I had to see you."

"Come in and have a drink," invited Biggles. "What's the idea of bringing John Chinaman back here ? I should have thought he'd seen enough of Borneo."

"That's what I've come to talk to you about," returned the wing-commander.

As they walked towards the " office " Biggles called Algy and introduced him. "He's my second-incommand," he explained. "He'd better hear what you have to say."

"Certainly. Well, I won't keep you long," promised the wing-commander. "Briefly, this is the story. When your parcel of prisoners arrived at Darwin, naturally we interrogated them all to extract any information they happened to possess. As a matter of detail we learned some interesting facts, but Fee Wong here had a particularly exciting item of news. He speaks English, by the way. Until we lost Malaya he was a big business man in Singapore. His line was timber—you know most of the teak comes from the upper end of the Malayan Peninsula ? Fee Wong's brother was in business with him—he looked after the timber concession and the saw-mills ; Fee Wong ran the business end at Singapore.

When the Japanese invaded, however, it happened that they were both at Telapur—that's the name of the upriver station where the teak is cut. I'm sorry to burden you with these details, but you must get a grasp of them to understand what is to come."

"Go ahead," said Biggles quietly.

"AS you probably know, the Japs seized an enormous quantity of rubber that had to be left behind when we retreated from Penang, on the western side of the Peninsula. We knew the Japs would get it, and

we knew that they'd ship it to Japan, but we didn't know how. Thanks to Fee Wong we do know now. Thousands of tons of rubber, and a considerable quantity of tin, has been loaded into rather more than a hundred barges ready to be shipped to Japan ; but instead of bringing all this stuff by sea round the southern tip of the

Peninsula, it is to be taken across to the eastern side. This saves a trip of several hundred miles and practically eliminates the chance of being bombed by us en route. The barges will use the River Limpur. As far as we know they are still moored on the western side, waiting for the rains which will make the river navigable for such craft."

"And you want them bombed ? "

"No. I'm afraid that wouldn't dispose of them. You see, they are moored some distance apart under overhanging trees, which makes them hard to see from the air. A hundred bombers might, with luck, get perhaps a score of barges at the very outside, scattered as they are. That's not good enough. The alternative is sabotage."

"The barges may already have left," Biggles pointed out. "It must be some time since Fee Wong was there."

"He was there a month ago, but he is sure the barges will not have left—or if they have they cannot have gone far, because until the rains start—and they're not due for another fortnight—the river is in many places too shallow to permit the passage of the boats.

There are also rapids."

Biggles lit a cigarette. He had an idea of what was coming.

"Fee Wong escaped from the Japs," continued the wing-commander. "His brother could not travel with him because at the time he was down with fever. Fee Wong and two Malays got away in a prahu—that is a native canoe—hoping to travel from island to island until they could make contact with British forces. Crossing the Torres Sea they were recaptured by a Jap destroyer and taken to Cotabato, where the Malays got away into the jungle. Anyway, you rescued Fee Wong, and here he is. The idea of sabotage hadn't occurred to him, but when we raised the subject he said it could be done easily. He knows every inch of the country. When the rains start the cables mooring the barges could be cut. They would then run amok and be smashed up in the rapids that occur along the river."

Biggles stared. "Are you suggesting that one man could cut the cables

of a hundred barges ? "

"Not one man, perhaps, but a lot of men could. The chances are that Fee Wong's brother, Ah Wong, is still at Telapur ; but even if he isn't, the native Malays and Chinese coolies will certainly be there, and Fee Wong knows every one of them. He says he has been a good master, and• is prepared to wager on their loyalty, both to him and to the British.

We visualize a picture of scores of coolies prowling about in the forest that bounds the river, doing all sorts of mischief to the Jap transports. All we have to do is get Fee Wong to the spot. That must be by air. There's no other way."

"Where is this aircraft going to land ? "

"On the river—obviously. The forest stretches away unbroken on both sides. There isn't even a field."

"But won't the Japs see it land ? "

"They might, but Fee Wong thinks it's unlikely. They can't patrol the whole length of the river. Anyhow, it's a chance Fee Wong is prepared to take."

"What about the pilot who flies him ? "

"I'm afraid he'll have to take the same risk. I own freely that the whole thing is a gamble, but the reward for us, if successful, would be enormous. If we fail, we lose one aircraft ; if we win, we might wipe out a whole Japanese convoy and all the rubber that they so badly need."

Biggles smiled grimly. "When you put it like that

it all sounds nice and easy, but it isn't going to be so funny for the chap who does this job. I take it you want me to send someone ? "

"That's why I've come here. This is the most suitable base we have from which to undertake the operation."

"But just a minute," put in Biggles. "I'm not so sure that this place is within range of my Cayman—the machine I should have to use."

"Yes, it is—just. We've been into that. Of course, there isn't much margin, but it can just be done."

"I'll check up on that," declared Biggles. He looked at the Chinese, a grave, elderly man, whose face gave no indication of what he was thinking.

"How do you feel about all this, Fee Wong ? "

"I think velly good," answered the Chinese simply.

The wing-commander looked at Biggles anxiously. "May I take it that you'll accept the mission ? "

"Yes, I'll do it," returned Biggles. " I'm not going to pretend that I'm enthusiastic about it because I'm not. I should say that the chances are pretty small against the pilot getting back, even if he gets there ; but as it's obviously up to someone to go, I might as well."

"Do you mean you'll do the job yourself ? "

"You don't think I'd ask a junior officer to take on a show like this, do you ? I'll go."

The wing-commander shrugged. "All right—if that's how you feel about it."

Biggles smiled. "We'll work it out between us, anyway. If Fee Wong is willing to go to Telapur, we should be a poor lot to jib at taking him."

"Good. Make the trip as soon as you can. As I told you, the rains aren't due for a fortnight ; the monsoon

is pretty constant, but as you probably know, it can vary by a day or two. Let me know how you get on. I must be getting back to Australia."

Ten minutes later the wing-commander and his pilot climbed into their machine, and the Cloud headed southeast on its long run home.

Biggles watched it go with a faint smile on his face. "How do these chaps get these cushy jobs ? " he asked Algy. "I've always wanted a job where I could float round in a comfortable aircraft and tell people to do the dirty work."

Algy grinned. "And if you got it you'd stick it for about a week. It takes two sorts to fight a war—those who work out what should be done, and those who do it. You're one of the people who do things."

Biggles sighed. "Maybe you're right. I'll have to think about this. Go.

and tell those fellows who are clearing up the mess on the aerodrome to get a move-on. I'll have a word or two with Fee Wong."

After carrying out Biggles's order Algy lost no time in seeking Ginger. He found him sitting on a log with Bertie discussing the recent crash.

"What's going on ? " asked Ginger suspiciously. "I'll warrant that staff-wallah didn't come all the way from Australia to wish us good morning."

"Or to bring us a set of ration coupons—if you see what I mean ? " chuckled Bertie.

"There's no secret about it," announced Algy, and then went on to supply the details.

Ginger and Bertie heard him out in silence.

"Why does Biggles always have to do these jobs himself ? " grumbled Ginger, when he had finished.

"Because, although he wouldn't admit it, he knows just how dangerous they are, and he's got a curious sort of complex about asking anyone to undertake a mission that might cost a bloke his life. He finds it easier to do the thing himself."

"I think it's time we protested," declared Ginger. "One of these days he won't come back—and then what ? The squadron wouldn't be the same without him. Apart from any other consideration, it's his personality that holds it together and makes everyone keen to pull on the rope."

"Go and tell him," grinned Algy.

"I'm serious," asserted Ginger. "You go with me and I will."

"I think I'll stay here—yes, by jingo," murmured Bertie, as Algy and Ginger walked towards the flimsy squadron office.

Biggles was bending over a map when they walked in. He glanced up. "Something wrong

? " he inquired sharply.

"Yes, sir—at least we think so," returned Ginger. "Go ahead—I'm listening."

"We—er—don't think it's right that you should take so many personal risks while there are other officers to do—er—jobs like this—er—latest one."

Biggles straightened himself. "Oh ! So that's it ? A conspiracy, eh ? "

"No, sir. I'm only saying what the others think," averred Ginger boldly.

"Perhaps you'd like to run the squadron ? "suggested Biggles coldly.

"I would, sir, but I couldn't—not as you run it," said Ginger. "We take the view that if anything happened to you the squadron would be in a mess."

Biggles's eyes switched to Algy. "This is pretty close to insubordination," he challenged.

Algy shook his head. "Ginger's right. To start with, this isn't an ordinary unit. Neither you nor

anyone else could run these unorthodox outside shows if discipline was maintained to the same extent as it is at a training squadron. You have to relax discipline to give initiative a chance. It's team work that sees us through. If we lose you the unit loses its head."

Biggles smiled faintly. "That's very kind and flattering of you, but why this sudden outburst of emotion ? "

"You're planning to do this job alone."

"Why not ? I've just been going over the ground. There's nothing to it."

"All the more reason why you should stay here and let someone else go," argued Algy.

Biggles shook his head. "A lot may depend on the success of this show. The responsibility is mine, and that being so, I'd rather keep it than hang it on someone else's shoulders."

"I can understand how you feel about that," confessed Algy, "but why go alone ? You might run into a lump of flak ; you might fall sick with fever ; you might—"

"Look here, Algy," broke in Biggles grimly, "if you are going to start running through all the things that might happen you'll be here all day. The only real risk in this show lies in running into hostile aircraft during daylight hours. The rest should be easy."

"Should be," echoed Algy. "Then why not take us with you, if only for company ? If you should need help—well, we'll be there."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "Do you mean the whole squadron ? "

"No—just us two."

"I see. You'd like to be in the party—is that it ? " " Well—er—more or less."

"All right," agreed Biggles. "I'm not a dog that I must keep the bone to myself. Come by all means. I hope you enjoy it. Personally I should say it will be a pretty dull affair."

"When do we start ? " asked Algy.

"Half an hour before sundown. I aim to do most of the show in the dark ; there's less likelihood of being seen by aircraft in the air or spotters on the ground. The thjng we've got to do is take Fee Wong to Telapur, put him ashore, and then get back without the enemy knowing anything about it."

"What about equipment ? " inquired Ginger.

"I don't think we shall need anything special. We'd better take revolvers, and iron rations in case of a forced landing. Unless an emergency arises everyone else on the station will stand fast until we get back. Now, if you'll leave me in peace for a little while, I've got some figures to work out."

The sun was dropping towards the horizon when the Cayman was wheeled out ready for its long-distance raid. Biggles glanced at the sun two or three times as the party walked over to the machine.

"What's the matter?" asked Algy, who noticed this.

" Nothing—I hope," answered Biggles. "I'm not quite happy about the mist that seems to be forming round the sun. I've got a feeling it means a change of weather. Still, we can't do anything about it. You'd better take charge of things inside the cabin. Ginger can sit next to me. Let's get away."

CHAPTER XI

MONSOON

THE Cayman took off and roared away on a course that was slightly

north of west.

Climbing steadily

for height, it was over Sarawak, the land of the White Rajahs, when the sun dropped into the Indian Ocean. Then the South China Sea came into view, with here and there a tiny island, as lonely as a moorland milestone, breaking its surface. Somewhere in the dim beyond lay Malaya, the objective.

The Cayman roared on across the dome of heaven under a canopy of stars that gleamed like frosted incandescent lamps. For a time they remained constant ; then, slowly but surely, the smaller ones began to fade ; presently the larger ones went out, while around the moon there began to form a pale transparent veil or mist.

Biggles glanced at Ginger in the seat beside him and made a grimace. He could see him in the glow of the instrument panel. "Not so good," he murmured. "I'm afraid weather is on the way. We may just be in time to miss it—or we may not. If it catches us out, my lad, you're going to wish you'd stayed at home. You'll remember this trip for a long time.

"

Never was prophecy more completely fulfilled.

Four hours passed. The sky was now overcast, ominous, but the sea could still be seen, or rather an occasional island, inky black, seeming to float in a great bottomless pool.

"Take a drift sight on one of those islands' and see what you make of it," ordered Biggles after a long silence.

Ginger started. He was nearly asleep, lulled into a feeling of false security by the unbroken drone of the engines. Five minutes later he answered.

"We're running into a head-wind of about forty miles an hour."

Biggles's face hardened. "That's what I thought. Fetch Algy."

Algy appeared, crouching behind Biggles, who explained the position.

"When we started I reckoned we hadn't more than half-an-hour's petrol in hand. We're running into a head-wind of forty miles an hour.

I needn't tell you what that means."

"What are you going to do—carry on, or go back and wait for better weather ? "

"If the monsoon is on the way we may have to wait three months for better weather,"

answered Biggles curtly. "If we go on we shall get to Telapur—but we shan't have enough juice to get back."

Ginger spoke. "I suggest that we take Fee Wong to Telapur, and then start thinking how to get home. If we can get him there, and he can bust up that convoy, the rest becomes comparatively unimportant."

Biggles glanced at Algy. They both smiled. "All right," said Biggles quietly, "let's go to Telapur."

Shortly afterwards the black mainland of Malaya came into view. Biggles did not actually make a landfall, but while still some miles out to sea he turned north. The weather was no worse, and while it was dark he hoped to make out the mouth of the river. An objective that has never before been viewed from the air is seldom easy to find

; nor was it in this case, and several times Biggles was misled by what turned out to be bays, or creeks, or channels behind islands too small to be shown on the map. Fee Wong was of very little use because he had never flown over the country, and while he knew it well enough from ground level, he confessed frankly that from the air one place was as another. However, when Biggles did find the River Limpur, he was able to confirm by its course that it was the right one. By this time Biggles had cut his engines, and, gliding, had lost a good deal of height.

To spot the actual sawmills of Telapur was obviously out of the question. Nothing less than a large city could have been picked out. All that could be seen was the grey ribbon of the meandering river, bordered on both sides by the solid mass of the virgin forest. Fee Wong had asserted that he would be able to identify the spot when he reached it by a long, straight stretch which occurred just above Telapur, but now that the crucial moment had come it turned out that there were several such reaches. For this Biggles was not unprepared. Far from being surprised, he would have been astonished had Fee Wong been able to take him straight to the place. He knew that the Chinese was doing his best, so he was patient with him.

"How far is Telapur from the West Coast ? " he asked.

But Fee Wong did not think in terms of miles. He could only say that it was about half-way across the Peninsula.

This helped Biggles quite a lot, for knowing from the map that at this latitude the Peninsula was about one hundred and fifty miles across, he could judge roughly when he was half-way. He flew lower, and as he flew, as is usually the case, it seemed to get darker.

He turned to Ginger. "There's only one thing left to do," he said. "Already we haven't enough petrol left to get back to Lucky Strike, so whether we use a little more or less can make no difference. We can't be a great distance from Telapur, so I'm going down to find out just where we are. If we put Fee Wong ashore anywhere along here he ought to be able to make his way on foot to his brother's bungalow. If we find that we are too far up the river we might be able to float down ; if we aren't far enough, we might be able to taxi. You swap places with Fee Wong."

Fee Wong came forward and sat in the seat next to Biggles. He looked long and steadily at the river, but it was the first time that he had seen it from above and he could not be sure of his position. He was honest enough to say so.

"Then I must go down and land," said Biggles.

" Velly good," answered Fee Wong imperturbably.

The actual landing was a hair-raising affair. First Biggles had to find a stretch of river running north-west to south-east in order to land into the wind. This was not absolutely vital on account of the high trees on either bank which would break the force of the wind, but it was a precaution. There was no stretch running absolutely in the desired direction, so he chose the nearest, and then glided down to land on water which at this point was between a hundred and two hundred yards broad.

The aircraft landed heavily, plunged on through a cloud of spray, came to rest for a moment, and then started floating with the stream.

"Look and see if you know where you are," Biggles told Fee Wong.

The Chinese stood up, surveyed both banks, and then told Biggles that he knew just where they were. When Biggles asked him if they were above or below Telapur, he pointed down-stream. He was not able to

state the exact distance, but Biggles gathered that the saw-mills were not far away.

"In that case the best thing we can do is sit still and float down," answered Biggles. "On the whole we've done pretty well."

The Cayman floated about a mile in a quarter of an hour and then stubbed its nose on a submerged sandbank. The tail drifted round, and turning slowly, the aircraft floated gently ashore against the south bank. To say that it drifted ashore may be misleading.

What it actually did was to drift into the tangled branches that hung far over the river, but it was still some yards from the actual bank.

"We may as well pull her right in," said Biggles. "There will be less chance of her being seen by anyone coming up or down the river."

This was easily done. By pulling on the branches it was possible to drag the aircraft against the bank. Having made her fast by the nose, they stepped ashore to stretch their cramped limbs.

"Well, this is it," observed Biggles. "This is where we say good-bye to Fee Wong." He turned to the Chinese. "Would you like us to stay here until you have made sure that your brother is at Telapur—or at any rate until you have seen that everything is all right ? "

"You have not enough petrol to go back to Borneo ? " queried Fee Wong.

"Don't worry about that," returned Biggles. "What you do ? "

"We shall fly as far as we can—perhaps reach the Borneo coast, or an island near it."

Actually, Biggles had as yet formed no definite plan.

"Maybe my brother have petrol," announced Fee Wong calmly.

Biggles started. "Say that again!"

"I say maybe my brother have petrol."

This was something for which Biggles was not prepared. "Why should he have petrol ? "

"He use petrol start engines in saw-mill."

"This puts a different complexion on things," declared Biggles. "You go along and find out if he has any. There's no need for us all to come."

"Shall I slip along with him ? " offered Ginger.

"In country like this I think it would be wiser if we kept together," decided Biggles. "If once we get separated anything can happen."

"I go," put in Fee Wong. "I come back pretty soon." He scrambled up the bank and disappeared into the darkness.

"I hope he's right about getting back pretty soon," said Biggles, making a slap at his face as, with a shrill metallic ping, a mosquito settled on it. "We shall be torn to pieces by mosquitoes if we stay here long. I think our best place is in the cabin ; it will at least afford some protection against the little beasts."

They got back into the machine and settled down to rest. Biggles lit a cigarette. Ginger and Algy tried to sleep, but the mosquitoes decided otherwise and they soon gave up in disgust. Then came a sound that brought Biggles bolt upright, rigid. It was the sharp patter of rain on the cabin roof.

" Rain ! " he ejaculated. "If this is the real rains starting we're in for a lovely time."

"What do you mean—the real rains ? " asked Ginger.

"The monsoon isn't due for a fortnight yet, and as a general rule it's pretty punctual ; but sometimes there is a sort of preliminary shower or two, just to give you a taste of what's coming. Once in a while the monsoon

arrives a bit ahead of its time, and if that is what has happened now we shall be in as unholy a mess as we've ever struck. I didn't say anything about it when we landed, but it seemed to me that the river was running pretty fast, as if there had already been some rain here, or at the headwaters of the river. Maybe we shall learn the truth when Fee Wong gets back."

Even while Biggles had been speaking the noise of falling water had risen to such a roar that Ginger found it hard to believe that it was caused by rain. He pulled the side window open and looked out. He could see nothing. Everything was blotted out by a curtain of water. It did not blow about, or rise and fall in volume : it came down in a constant downpour as if a million taps had been turned on. He shut

the window.

"It's certainly raining," he told the others. "How long is it likely to keep on ? "

"A week, maybe a month, perhaps on and off for three months," answered Biggles.

"Three months ! " Ginger looked aghast. "The world would be flooded."

Biggles smiled wanly. " It is--at least, this part of the world. At home we get about twenty-five inches of rain a year. Here, it can do that, and more, in a day. They don't measure it in inches but in feet. It's no use kidding ourselves. I'm afraid the monsoon has started. It's bad luck, coming like this ahead of its time, but we can't stop it. It's just one of those things. What I'm worried about is how far this will upset Fee Wong's plan. The barges may leave before he can muster his sabotage gang. Meanwhile the river will rise so fast that you'll think you're going up in a lift."

"But, dash it all, we can't just sit here doing nothing," declared Ginger.

"This is one of those occasions when we can't do

Anything else," returned Biggles evenly. "We're better Off here than out on the stream, although if the rain 'goes on we shall probably be washed out, anyway. If We aren't washed out we shall be lifted up into the trees. By that time the river will be hard to find, because the whole country becomes flooded. For the moment I'm content to stay in the dry—we shall be wet soon enough. We may as well open a tin of bully and nibble a biscuit."

Two hours passed. The rain maintained its constant roar, and Ginger began to wonder how long it would be before the noise drove him mad. One thing was certain : unless there was a lull, even if they obtained petrol, they were tied to the river, for it would be hopeless to try to get off through the blinding rain.

At length a shout broke the weary vigil. A storm-lantern gleamed mistily through the falling rain. It was Fee Wong, his gown plastered to his body by mud and water. Behind him stood another figure, a Chinese of about the same age. Ginger guessed it was Ah Wong, Fee Wong's brother, and this turned out to be correct. Biggles shouted to them to come into the cabin, for it was next to impossible to carry on a conversation outside.

The two Chinese came in, dripping water that formed pools on the floor.

"Monsoon start," said Fee Wong, without emotion. "I'd noticed it," returned Biggles, with a suspicion of sarcasm. "What's the news ? "

With Oriental imperturbability Fee Wong then proceeded to narrate a story of calamity so unexpected that the airmen sat motionless in speechless dismay. It was worse than anything they could have foreseen. Ginger tried to put the main facts in his memory.

They were these.

The monsoon had broken. There had already been

some advance showers over the preceding four days, with the result that the Japanese barges had already left their moorings on the western side of the Peninsula and were well on their way to the east. They were, in fact, at Telapur, moored just beyond the mills, and would have gone farther had there not been a Japanese military pontoon bridge to interrupt their passage. Across this bridge Japanese forces, including guns and light tanks, had already passed. But the main force was still to cross, and it was thought that the crossing would take place within the next twenty-four hours. Those who had already crossed had quartered themselves in the mill. After the crossing had been effected the bridge would be dismantled, when the barges would proceed on their way. So much Fee Wong had learned from his brother, who was still at the mill. The spot where the Cayman now clung precariously to the bank was less than four miles from the mill, and less than five from the bridge.

What about the petrol ? " asked Biggles, when Fee Wong finally broke off.

Somehow Ginger knew what the answer would be before the Chinese answered.

Troubles seldom come singly.

"No petrol," answered Fee Wong. "The Japanese have taken."

Biggles lit a cigarette and smoked for a moment in silence. "Looks as though we're going to stay here for a bit," he remarked presently.

"No stay," declared Fee Wong. "River rise. Break aeroplane in pieces."

"Okay, then we don't stay," murmured Biggles. "That means we go."

"No go," said Fee Wong. "River smash you all up."

Biggles looked at Algy and Ginger in turn. "You heard that ? We can't stay and we can't go. That's fine. Now let's get down to brass tacks and decide just what we are going to do."

Further inquiry produced the information that the petrol, about forty gallons of ordinary commercial spirit, was still in the mill, although it had been piled, with other things the invaders had seized, ready for removal. Ah Wong and the coolies who worked the mill were not actually confined, possibly because there was nowhere to confine them. They had simply been ordered by the Japanese to remain where they were. The barges were moored close together and a sentry stood guard over each one, apart from a number of troops who were bivouacked on the bank. Ah Wong was of opinion that one or two mooring-ropes might with luck be cut, but the saboteurs would then be discovered.

"That's not much use," muttered Biggles. "We've got to get the lot. If we could bust that bridge, not only would it disorganize the Jap column, but it would be pretty certain to draw attention away from the barges. The time factor is really what we are up against."

Tomorrow, apparently, the rest of the Japs will cross, and the barges will then proceed on their way ; and once they are out of reach of Ah Wong's coolies it won't be much use our chasing them."

Now while Biggles had been speaking Ginger had looked through the side window, mainly with the object of ascertaining how far the water had risen. It was up, he judged, about two feet, and he was about to turn back to the cabin when a movement on the bank caught his eye. For a moment he stared at an immense black object, and as it moved again, fear—fear of the unknown —chilled him. His face was a shade paler when he turned back into the cabin.

"I say ! Just a minute," he said breathlessly. "There's something on the bank—an enormous creature. I can't make out what it is."

Fee Wong permitted himself to smile faintly. "Elephant," he said. "Elephant belong my brother."

Ginger grinned sheepishly, not a little relieved. " I didn't know you had a tame elephant."

"We got a hundred elephant," said Ah Wong evenly.

Ginger blinked. "A hundred elephants ! Great Scott ! What do you do with them ? "

By this time Biggles was looking interested. He had no idea of a purpose to which a hundred elephants could be put, but he never left a possibility unexplored.

"Yes," he said quickly, remembering vaguely that elephants were used throughout the East for timber haulage, "what exactly do you do with these elephants, Fee Wong ? "

Fee Wong explained that when teak was first cut it was too heavy to float, and for that reason the logs, after being trimmed, were left lying on the bank for about six months, at the end of which time they were so far seasoned that they did not sink. They were then floated down to the saw-mill. The elephants were used to haul the logs to the water. Just above the point where the aircraft was moored they had a great number of logs ready for floating down. The work had, of course, been interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese invaders.

"Is that so ? " said Biggles, who was thinking fast. He turned to Algy. "A teak log is a pretty massive lump of timber. If we could get some of them on the water .they'd go down the river like battering-rams and burst the pontoon bridge. The disorganization would give us a chance to get at the barges." He turned back to Fee Wong. "Are the elephants up by the timber now ? "

Ah Wong stepped into the conversation and said that they were. They were hidden in the forest in charge of an Indian mahout.

"Will the elephants work at night ? " inquired Biggles.

Ah Wong smiled at the white man's ignorance. "These are trained elephants. They do what they are told."

"Okay," said Biggles. "Let's get busy. We'll bust the bridge and then set to work on the barges. Lead the way, Ah Wong."

CHAPTER XII

A HECTIC NIGHT

GINGER was wet through before he had climbed the muddy bank to the rough track which, it

was discovered, followed it. The world had become a nightmare of water, a deluge that descended in a never-ending stream from above and made the earth like a soaked sponge.

Everything dripped. The noise was unbelievable.

The elephant was a docile beast, as most trained elephants are. It turned out to be Ah Wong's riding animal. Ginger was invited to ride, but he preferred to walk, although he was soon glad to hang on to the elephant's tail.

"We're mad," he told Biggles, who trudged along beside him.

"Everyone's mad. The whole world's gone mad."

" You invited yourself to the picnic, don't forget," answered Biggles.

On they plunged through a world of water, mud and water, for about twenty minutes ; then Ah Wong called a halt.

What happened after that Ginger was not quite sure. For one thing, something—he never knew what it was—stung him on the neck, and gave him a good deal of pain. There were shouts in the forest and, occasionally, the trumpeting of elephants. Great black shapes began to move. Logs crashed ; they rolled ; they splashed into the river, flinging up sheets of water to meet the curtain that descended. The three white men stood together.

There was nothing they could do. Fee Wong appeared from time to time and had a few words with them. Calm and unmoved, he might have been at a garden party. Sometimes he gave a word of advice to a panting coolie. To Ginger it was all a confused dream of pain and rain, rain, and still more rain. Sometimes he found himself wondering if it was really happening. Never with greater relief did he note the first dull streaks of dawn. The rain still fell, but not quite so heavily. The river was a turgid flood.

Ah Wong appeared and spoke to his brother. With him was a huge Malay foreman.

Ginger happened to catch sight of the man's back, and shuddered. It had recently been flogged to ribbons. The man glanced round and saw Ginger staring. For a moment their eyes met, and at the expression of sullen hate in those of the native Ginger felt his blood run cold. He guessed who had done the flogging, and Ah Wong confirmed it.

" Kayan ask Japanese not to burn his home," he said evenly. "They flog

him plenty much. He no like Japanese." "I can understand that," answered Biggles grimly.

Fee Wong said he thought that the logs by this time must have torn the bridge away by sheer weight, but suggested that it would be a good thing to make sure.

"All right, let's find out," agreed Biggles. He had to shout in order to make himself heard above the noise of falling water.

They all set off along the bank. The Cayman was still at its moorings, but it had been lifted up into the branches of the trees, an alarming and melancholy spectacle. The fabric had been torn in several places. Ginger noticed a water-snake coiled on the tailplane.

Biggles paused for a moment to look at the aircraft. He shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing we can do about it," he remarked.

This was so obviously true that no one disputed it. At that moment it seemed unlikely that the machine would ever fly again.

They went on. But not very far. At the next bend, a sharp one, with one accord they pulled up at the sight that met their eyes. For a full minute no one spoke.

Then Biggles said in a bitter voice, "Would you believe it ! "

What had happened was this. The timber had not gone down the river as had been intended. It seemed that a giant tree had fallen across the river during the night. Against this the logs had jammed, forming a dam behind which water, weeds and still more logs had piled up. Beyond it the river was clear.

Ginger could have wept with mortification and disappointment. "After all that work," he said sadly. The two Chinese simply gazed, impassive.

At that moment a coolie appeared running up the track. He was chattering like a monkey.

"What's he talking about ? " demanded Biggles.

Fee Wong turned. "He say Japanese are crossing river now," he said.

A strange look came into Biggles's eyes. "By thunder ! " he cried. "If that dam were to burst it would let loose a million tons of water and

hundreds of tons of timber. The bridge would be swept away like a scrap of tissue paper—and so would the barges."

It is unlikely that Kayan the Malay understood these words, but he had heard what the coolie had reported, and he was not a timber foreman for nothing ; it may be supposed that he understood even better than Biggles what would happen if the dam burst. His face split in a dreadful smile, showing crimson betel-nut-stained teeth. Then, before the others realized his intention, and certainly before they could stop him, he had dashed down to the river. In his hand he carried a heavy crowbar that he had used during the night to move the logs. Using this as a balancing pole, he started across the dam, leaping from log to log with the agility of long experience. It was obvious what he intended to do.

Biggles shouted, but the native took no notice, even if he heard, which is unlikely.

"If that dam bursts he'll be ground to pulp!" cried Algy in a strangled voice.

"He knows," said Fee Wong calmly. "The Japanese have killed his wife and children, so he no longer has love of life. He prefers revenge. Kayan is a Malay."

When Kayan was about midstream he chose a spot, drove in the iron bar and heaved.

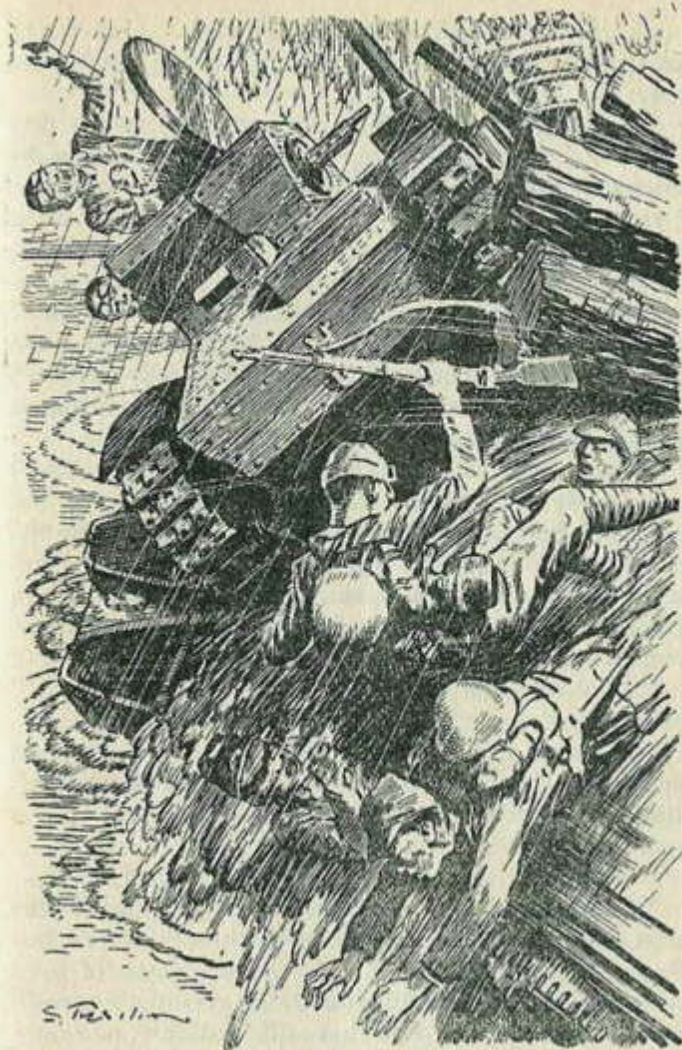
Those on the bank could only watch helplessly. No one spoke. No one moved. It was one of those moments when time seems to stand still. Ginger saw the log on which Kayan was standing begin to move. The Malay threw all his weight on the bar. The log swung out. Then,, with a roar like a high-explosive bomb bursting on a concrete road, the dam fell, and the next instant a thousand tons of logs, impelled by a mighty tidal wave, were hurtling pell mell down the stream. For a brief moment Kayan stood poised on a log. He flung the bar away, and stood with his arms outstretched like a bronze statue in an attitude of triumph. Then he disappeared from sight amongst the grinding timbers and the flood of yellow, foam-flecked water.

Ginger drew a deep breath and moistened his lips. "I shall see that sight for as long as I live," he said in a hard thin voice.

" Quick ! " cried Fee Wong, for once shaken out of his Oriental restraint. He started running up a hill which at this point flanked the river.

The others followed. Unmindful of rain, of mud, of thorns that tore his flesh, Ginger dragged himself through the sodden jungle. He had no idea of where he was going, or why, nor did he trouble to think. Like an animal, he simply went because the others went.

In five minutes they reached the brow of the hill, and then he understood. The river swept round the hill in a wide curve, and from their new position they could see beyond the bend. They were just in time to see the churning wave strike the bridge, and as Biggles had prophesied, it was swept away like a scrap of tissue paper. With it went Japanese soldiers, lorries and guns, to swell the tumult that rushed on in an ever-spreading tide. It overswept the banks and tore away great trees as if they had been soft-



With it went Japanese soldiers, lorries and guns.

stemmed weeds.

Fee Wong pointed. "The barges," was all he said.

Ginger had not noticed them, for they were loaded deep in the water and moored close to the bank. Now, for the first time, he saw them, and the crews who were jumping ashore in a desperate attempt to save themselves from the raging flood that was sweeping down on

them. What happened after that was not clear, for the barges were swallowed up in leaping spray and plunging logs. A length of teak, looking harmless enough from the distance but weighing many tons, struck one of the barges like a torpedo. Other logs were thrown on top of the sinking vessel, and presently all that could be seen was a curtain of spray in which logs and barges were hopelessly intermingled.

Biggles was the first to speak. " Kayan did a fine job," he said. "He took it out of our hands. There seems to be nothing more for us to do. It will take an army to clean up that mess, even if it is possible to clean it up, which I doubt. The troops left on the north side of the river will have to stay there until the monsoon is over. What are you going to go, Fee Wong ? "

The Chinese spoke to his brother in his own language. Turning back to Biggles he said, "

My brother stay here. I stay, too. Perhaps we get back to China some day. What you do ?

"

Biggles made a wry face. "To tell the truth, Fee Wong, I don't know. I shall be in a better position to decide when I've seen my aeroplane."

Through slime and rotting vegetation they made their way down to the river bank, now a morass from which protruded dead trees and the roots of trees from which the soil had been washed ; every one provided a sanctuary

for centipedes, scorpions and an occasional snake. The air was heavy with the stench of rotting wood and leaves.

The Cayman was still at its moorings, but it presented a depressing picture. It had been lifted by the water that had piled up behind the dam into the branches of the trees which hung low over the river. When the water had fallen suddenly on the bursting of the dam the mooring-rope had caught in a branch so that the nose was held up clear of the stream.

The wing fabric /as torn in several places, but the hull, as far as could be seen through mud and festoons of weeds, appeared to be undamaged. The snake was no longer sitting on the tail, Ginger noticed.

Biggles made a quick examination. "She doesn't look exactly pretty, but I don't think there's any serious damage," he announced. "We have only to cut the mooring-rope and she'll flop down on the water. Anyway, the river is rising again, so she'll soon be afloat, although if it gets very much higher she's likely to be smashed up completely."

"Could we get her into the air, do you think ? " asked Algy.

"We shall only find that out by trying," answered Biggles. "I feel like trying to get her off right away, although, of course, we haven't enough petrol to get back to Borneo."

"How much are we short ? " inquired Ginger.

"It's impossible to tell just what remains in the tanks while she's in this cockeyed position," replied Biggles. "If we could get the forty gallons of juice Ah Wong had at the mill, and which presumably is still there, it would help, but that still wouldn't guarantee us enough to get home. I must admit it's a bit of a problem. It seems crazy to take off knowing that sooner or later we shall have to make a forced landing ; on the other hand it seems equally hopeless to stay here." Biggles looked at Fee Wong. "Do you think there is any chance of getting the petrol from the mill ? "

Fee Wong spoke to his brother, who looked dubious.

What his answer would have been must remain a matter for conjecture, for before he had time to speak the conference was broken up in a devastating manner. First, there came a sound of crashing in the jungle at no great distance. Mingled with the crashing was a strange clanking noise, as if chains were being dragged. Everyone looked in the direction from which these sounds came, which was up the river bank. The clanking and crashing approached ; it might have been a train coming through the undergrowth. Then a shrill trumpeting provided a clue to the mystery. Ah Wong cried out a single word, but before it could be translated there burst into sight the most enormous bull elephant Ginger had ever seen. It was coming at a quick run, its trunk coiled inwards. Great beads of greasy sweat formed two channels down its face. Broken shackles clung to its legs.

"It's Sultan ! " cried Fee Wong. "He's mad ! "

Ginger recalled vaguely that he had heard of bull elephants in captivity having occasional outbursts of madness, but this was the first one he had ever seen. He did not stay to watch. Nor did the others, for at that moment the great beast saw them, and with a shrill blast of

rage it broke into a lumbering gallop. It was obviously futile to try to escape by running. There was only one possible way of evading the crazed animal's fury, and that was by water, and everyone seemed to realize it. With one exception there was a general rush

for the aircraft. Ah Wong climbed a tree. Unfortunately it was not a very big tree, and it was due to this fact that the others were given a chance.

Biggles took a running jump into the cockpit, and from there into the cabin. He reappeared with the emergency axe. One chop severed the taut mooring-rope. The aircraft crashed down on the water like a ship launched down a slipway. By this time the others had either jumped or pulled themselves aboard, Ginger on the hull, Algy on the centre section, and Fee Wong on the tail. Biggles yelled frantically for help. He was pushing against a thick branch trying to shove the aircraft clear. He also yelled to Ah Wong to jump for it.

Ah Wong was still in the tree, and it was upon him that the elephant's bloodshot eyes were turned. It had seized the trunk and was trying to tear it out of the ground. The tree swayed horribly. Finding that it could not uproot the tree, the great beast put its head against it and pushed. The tree bent before the ponderous weight. Ah Wong slid along a branch and hung by his hands.

"Look out ! " yelled Biggles. "The tree is going."

As he spoke he pulled out his revolver and opened fire on the elephant, not with any idea of trying to kill it with so small a weapon, but in order to attract its attention. In this he succeeded, but not before the tree had snapped. It fell into the muddy water, carrying Ah Wong with it. Ginger ran forward and grabbed a branch. The elephant slid down the bank into the water, and the surging wave its mighty body produced provided just that little extra force that was required to drive the Cayman free. It surged out into the swiftly running stream. Ah Wong, by scrambling over the branches of his tree, was able to reach Ginger's hand.

Panting with exertion and excitement, Ginger dragged him aboard.

"Get him into the cabin and help me clean up this mess ! " shouted Biggles, who by this time was tearing at the weeds that festooned the aircraft, and flinging them overboard.

The Cayman, broadside on, drifted, a helpless hulk, with the fast-flowing stream. Ginger started to laugh foolishly. He had never seen

an aircraft in such a state, nor could he have imagined it. It was splashed to the wing tips with mud. Weeds hung across the hull and from the engine cowlings.

"What in thunder are you laughing at ? " shouted Biggies. "Let's get the worst of this stuff off her. Don't you realize that in another five minutes, if we don't get off, we shall be passing the mill, running the gauntlet between the Japs on both banks ? "

Ginger stopped laughing abruptly. He wasn't really amused. Loss of sleep, excitement and exhaustion, combined with the steamy heat of the monsoon, were beginning to tell on his highly strung nerves. However, making an effort to pull himself together, he tore at the weeds and cast them into the river. He supposed, for the time being at any rate, the excitement was over ; but in this he was mistaken. It is true that the elephant, mad though it was said to be, was not so crazy as to pursue the aircraft in the river. It stood in the slime of the bank, frustrated, but watching, waving its trunk in animal rage.

The next incident was different. There was a sudden shout. A rifle cracked, and a bullet tore a strip of canvas from the wing within a foot of Ginger's face. He nearly fell into the river. Grabbing the engine cowling for support, he looked in the direction from which the shot had come, and saw with consternation not fewer than a score of Japanese soldiers scrambling along the river bank. They were just below the elephant, which had turned its massive head in quest of the new diversion. What the Japanese were doing Ginger, of course, did not know, but he supposed that they had been sent up the stream to see who was responsible for throwing the logs into it—or possibly they were looking for Ah Wong. However that may be, they saw the British aircraft and at once turned their attention to it ; and the plight of the airmen would have been precarious indeed had it not been for their late enemy, the elephant. The Japs had not seen the elephant. They were looking at the aircraft. In any case, smothered with mud as it was, and standing below the level of the track, the creature would have been difficult to see had the aircraft not been there to absorb attention. The Japanese lined the bank, taking up convenient positions from which to open fire. At the same time the elephant climbed the bank to locate the new arrivals, which it had heard but so far had not seen.

When it reached the top of the bank the Japanese were in plain view, and it appeared to hate them on sight. With a trumpet of rage it charged.

The Japanese promptly lost all interest in the aircraft, although for this they were hardly to be blamed. Some tried to scramble up the bank ; others, more courageous, or possibly because they realized the futility of running, turned their rifles on the beast. But it takes a well-placed bullet to stop a charging elephant, and in a moment the creature was among them. Everyone on the aircraft, including Biggles, stopped what he was doing to watch.

At that moment the rain started again in earnest, blotting out the scene. Ginger gasped.

He could not have imagined such rain. It tumbled out of heaven as if intent on washing the earth out of existence. So eager was it to reach the ground that it did not resolve itself into drops, but lashed the earth in a continuous stream. From one end of the aircraft it was not possible to see the other.

Biggles beckoned to Algy, and caught Ginger by the arm. "No use trying to do anything in this ! " he bellowed above the noise of falling water. "If it keeps on we may drift past the mill without being ,seen."

Ginger nodded. He realized that when Biggles had said it was no use trying to do anything he was speaking the literal truth. It was impossible to see for five yards, so to attempt to take off, even if they managed to get the engines started, would have been suicidal. The machine was turning slowly as it drifted, so the very position of the banks was lost. Without a stationary object in view it was not possible even to reckon the rate of progress down the river. With its anxious crew peering into the murk, the aircraft drifted on, a scrap of flotsam on a yellow tide.

"If only this infernal rain would stop we might be able to get off," grumbled Algy.

"If the infernal rain stopped we should probably be under fire from enemy troops on both sides of the river," murmured Biggles.

" In other words," put in Ginger, "we are between the devil and the deep blue sea."

CHAPTER XIII

ADVENTURES ON THE RIVER

OME minutes later, very deliberately and quite

smoothly, the Cayman ran her nose into a bank of shrub-fringed mud. From the shrubs arose a single lightning-blasted tree. Naturally, Ginger thought they had hit one of the banks. The others probably thought so too, although they made no comment. The two Chinese conversed for a moment, and then Fee Wong announced that they had struck an islet. They were able to identify it by the blasted tree. They had already passed the mill, and were about two miles below it.

"So what do we do ? " inquired Ginger. "Stay here and let the rising water float us off ? "

Biggles did not answer immediately. He was standing on the nose staring into the rain on the port side. He jumped ashore, scrambled along the mud for a few yards, looked again, and then came back.

"There's a barge just along there," he announced. "It's half-way up the bank—must have been thrown there by the waves when the dam burst."

"Anyone on it ? " asked Algy.

"I didn't see anyone. I think we'd better find out, though, or someone may be taking pot-shots at us any minute." So saying, Biggles drew his revolver and disappeared into the rain.

Five minutes passed. The aircraft moved slightly. Another five minutes and it moved again.

"What's he up to ? " muttered Algy irritably—

referring, of course, to Biggles. "The water is still rising. We may float off at any moment, and if we do he'll be left stranded."

"Shall I go and hurry him up ? " suggested

Ginger.

"Yes, I think you'd better," decided Algy. "When you get ashore I'll throw you the painter, and you can tie her up in case of accidents."

"Okay," answered Ginger and jumped ashore.

Now in doing this he had forgotten two things. So, for that matter, had Algy. The first was, that in order to release the aircraft when the elephant had attacked, Biggles had cut the painter so that only a few

feet remained attached to the mooring-ring in the nose of the aircraft—certainly not enough to serve the purpose for which it was intended. Ginger stood on the bank and waited for Algy to throw the rope. Algy then discovered that the rope was not long enough, and shouted something to this effect. His voice ended in a yell, for the aircraft was definitely moving. Ginger realized, too late, that this was due to the removal of his weight from the nose, on which he had been standing, and he made haste to correct his error. But his very haste was his undoing, for he slipped on the slimy mud and fell. Even in falling he still tried to grab the nose of the machine, but all he did was to make matters worse. His hands failed to find a grip, so in effect he did the very last thing he wanted to do, which was to give the nose a shove. This was sufficient to push it clear. The machine began to swing. Shouting, Ginger ran along the edge of the mud, hoping that it would drift in again ; but the current now had the aircraft in its grip, and with increasing speed it joined the debris that was floating down on the flood.

Another moment and it had disappeared from sight in the deluge.

For a few seconds Ginger stared in dismay at the grey blanket where it had vanished.

Then he turned and ran—or rather, floundered—through the mire to the barge, the dark bulk of which he could now see. It struck him that there might be enemy troops on the vessel, but he didn't stop ; spurred by calamity, he staggered forward, concerned only with finding Biggles and letting him know what had happened.

The barge lay tilted slightly on its side on the mud. It was surrounded by water, shallow where it had driven ashore, but deep at the stern end. Ginger scrambled aboard. The barge was loaded with something ; he did not stop to examine the cargo because it was covered by lashed tarpaulins. Not a soul was in sight, so he ran down the catwalk to the stern, where a vertical metal exhaust pipe indicated—as he imagined—a stove.

Reaching the companion-way he shouted, " Hi I Biggles ! "

A voice answered him from the depths, so he hastened down a short flight of steps to a small square compartment that was a combination of cabin and engine-room. He noticed several pieces of Japanese uniform, apparently left behind by the crew in their hasty flight. Biggles was there. He was bending over something. As Ginger approached he looked back over his shoulder with a smile of

satisfaction.

"This is a bit of luck," he said cheerfully. "I hadn't realized, although I suppose I should, that these barges are power-operated. The engine is an internal combustion job—looks like a converted car engine to me. The petrol tank is half full."

Biggles had spoken so quickly that Ginger had had no opportunity to speak. The irony of the situation stabbed him so sharply that he groaned aloud.

"What's the matter ? " asked Biggles.

"I was wondering what you are going to do

with the petrol now you've got it," answered Ginger sadly.

"Transfer it to the machine, of course."

"What machine ? "

Biggles frowned. "Are you trying to be funny, or

are you just plain crazy ? I mean the aircraft." "You'll have to find it first," announced Ginger.

"The last I saw of it, it was sailing down the river."

Biggles jumped up with alacrity. "Why didn't you make fast ? " he rasped.

"Because there was nothing to tie up with. If you remember, you ,sliced the rope close to the bows."

Biggles nodded. "Quite right. So I did."

"I was coming to look for you and the rising water carried the machine away."

Biggles wiped his mud-smeared hands and face with

what had once been a handkerchief. "We're doing fine," he averred. "First we have a plane but not enough petrol. Now we have petrol but

no plane. What with one thing and another we seem to be on a spot. As far as I can see we've only one hope. Algy may be able to get the engines going, in which case he'll turn back to pick us up. What's it doing outside ? "

"The rain isn't quite so heavy, I think," replied Ginger. "The river is rising fast."

"If it is, then it's only a question of time before this barge floats. If it floats we shall follow Algy down the river. Come to think of it, that wouldn't be a bad idea. We should at least be getting farther away from the mill and the Japanese troops. Come and give me a hand."

Without knowing quite what he was going to do, Ginger followed Biggles to the deck and watched him drag back a tarpaulin, exposing the cargo. The result was not unexpected. It consisted of bales of raw rubber.

"Let's start and chuck this stuff overboard," said Biggles. "The less weight there is on board the sooner the barge will float."

They set to work heaving the bales overboard, and by the end of ten minutes the barge had acquired a noticeable buoyancy. They continued with the work, and presently had the satisfaction of feeling the vessel move. Biggles picked up a long sweep that formed part of the barge's equipment, and digging one end into the mud, threw his weight on it.

The stern began to swing round.

"We're afloat ! " he cried, and in another minute the islet was sliding past. Ginger noticed two more barges, one high and dry and the other capsized.

"What are we going to do—drift, or start the engine and try to get some sort of control ?

" he asked.

"We'd better drift," declared Biggles. "I can't see that there's anything to be gained by using the engine. We couldn't make headway against the stream even if we wanted to ; we're bound to go down ; with visibility zero we shall probably travel fast enough without the engine. Let's see how we go."

Biggles took up a position in the stern, with the sweep trailing in the

water to act in the manner of a rudder. Ginger stood beside him, peering into the rain-soaked air, hoping to see something. It was still raining, but the downpour was not as heavy as it had been, and visibility had increased to perhaps fifty yards ; but even so, there was no sign of either bank. In this condition the barge drifted down the stream at a pretty fast rate.

Ginger knew that they were travelling at a good speed, but not until he caught a glimpse of a bank at a bend, where they swung near the shore, did he realize fully just how fast they were going. Neither, for that matter, did Biggles, who uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"We ought to overtake the Cayman," observed Ginger.

"Not unless it runs ashore," disputed Biggles. "If it's drifting, it must be travelling at the same rate as ourselves and everything else that's adrift on the river."

Nothing more was said for a little while. Then Ginger remarked : "The rain seems to be exhausting itself. It's nothing like as bad as it was."

This was' obviously true. The rain was no longer a cascade ; it had settled down to a steady drizzle, and visibility improved accordingly. It became possible to see the banks dimly, as through a grey veil. For some minutes Biggles concentrated on keeping the barge in the middle Of the stream with his sweep. This involved strenuous work, and perspiration made white channels in the grime on his face.

" Stewth 1 This is too much like hard labour," he remarked. "I'm going to try to start the engine. Now we can see where we're going it may give us some measure of control. Take over the sweep, and try to hold her in the middle of the stream until I get back."

Ginger took the sweep and Biggles disappeared into the cabin. A few moments later the engine came to life and the barge quivered to its vibrations. Biggles reappeared.

"That's better," he said, taking the tiller. "You can stow that sweep."

Under the power of its engine the barge swept down the river at what was a truly alarming speed for so ponderous a vessel. The banks slid by in dull procession. In several places they had been washed away, leaving the forest standing in a turgid flood.

Ginger noticed several more barges that had gone ashore. One was upside down.

"We certainly made a mess of that convoy," he observed.

Biggles did not answer, and glancing round to see why, Ginger noticed that he was staring straight ahead with a fixed expression on his face.

" Look ! " said Biggles tersely. "The Cayman. What's that beside it ? "

Looking down the river, Ginger saw an aircraft that he recognized at once as the amphibian. There was another vessel, a small marine craft, beside it. In it a man was standing up, waving his arms as though giving instructions. Both vessels seemed to be travelling slowly.

• " That's a motor launch," said Biggles crisply. "If it is, it can only be a Jap. It must have been coming up to take charge of the barges—or to see what caused the break-away—

and met the Cayman coming down."

"Why, it's got the Cayman in tow ! " cried Ginger as he saw a line suddenly spring taut between the two craft.

"By thunder ! You're right," answered Biggles. "The launch is trying to tow the aircraft to the bank. That chap in the bows is shouting orders to Algy. None of them have seen us yet. I think we'll take a hand in this:"

The barge was now about two hundred yards from the launch, which was heading diagonally up-stream, apparently with the object of getting out of the main flow of the river. Behind it, yawing under the strain of the tow-rope, was the Cayman. The barge, many times larger than the launch, bore down on the scene as a heavy lorry on a road might approach a bicycle. Ginger, glancing at Biggles's face, saw that he was smiling.

"Watch the splinters fly," said Biggles, leaning on the tiller.

By this time it was clear that the crew of the launch had seen the barge. Several men were standing up, signalling frantically, presumably in the hope that the barge would alter its course. There was, as Biggles remarked calmly, no reason why they should suppose that the barge was manned by two members of the British Royal Air Force. With their uniforms and faces caked with mud, Biggles and Ginger might have belonged to any service in any army.

At the last moment, to obtain more speed, the man in the stern of the launch cast off the line that held the Cayman in tow ; but by that time

it was too late. The barge swept towards the vessel, a small river cruiser, with the relentless force of an avalanche crashing down on an Alpine hut. It struck the launch amidships. It checked for a moment in its mad career and then went on, leaving behind it some splinters of wood and one or two men struggling in the water. The launch, with one of its sides stove in, had sunk like a stone.

Biggles paid no further attention to it. He could not have stopped even had he wanted to, and he did not want to. He was afraid he might hit the Cayman. He did, in fact, pass close to it, and was able to shout to Algy, "Stand by ! We're coming back."

Biggles was now only too anxious to check the speed of the barge in order to make contact with the aircraft,

but there seemed to be no way of doing this, although the Cayman was, of course, still drifting down the river out of control.

"Hold tight I" shouted Biggles to Ginger. "I'm going to try to bring her round. If I can get her nose up-stream it may steady our pace."

So saying, Biggles threw his whole weight on the tiller. The barge, which in spite of its engine was still in the grip of the current, began to swing round in a wide circle ; but the river was not wide enough for such a manœuvre, and it was soon clear that the vessel would never complete the half-circle necessary to achieve his object. In fact, it did not get broadside to the stream, but rushed straight towards the river bank—or rather where, during the dry season, the bank would have been. The forest was now inundated, and the only difference between the flood beyond the bank and the river was that the river rushed on whereas the flooded forest was quiet. It might have been a lake.

"We can't make it 1 " yelled Biggles, and dragged on the tiller to take up his original course. But the barge was too near the bank, and before it could get round into the main stream it had crashed into the trees.

Ginger dived into the cabin to prevent himself from being swept off by the overhanging branches. Biggles followed him. For a few seconds the barge crashed broadside-on through the trees, snapping them off like twigs. Then it came silently to rest, afloat in the jungle.

"That was very clever of me," snarled Biggles, as he scrambled back to the deck. Ginger also emerged, and Was just in time to see the Cayman go gliding past on the main stream.

Algy yelled something, but neither Biggles nor Ginger heard what he said.

Biggles wiped sweat and mud from his face. "I'm not used to handling barges," he remarked disgustedly, and sat down. Another moment and he was on his feet again as an aero engine roared.

Ginger fairly danced with excitement. "It's Algy!" he shouted, somewhat vaguely. "He's got his engines started. He's coming back."

This was true. The Cayman soon appeared, coming up-stream on a diagonal course towards the gap in the trees made by the barge.

"He's only got to collide with a teak log coming down the river to wind up a really good day's work," remarked Biggles wearily.

But this did not happen. The Cayman roared into the gap. As soon as it was out of the grip of the current the engines stopped. The aircraft surged on to bump its nose gently against the side of the barge. Algy stood up. He was grinning.

"If the squadron could have seen you trying to do a vertical bank in that barge—"

"Oh, shut up," growled Biggles. "Come aboard and let's have some lunch. Have you still got your passengers?"

"Yes, they're here," answered Algy.

"Bring them along," ordered Biggles. "The Chinese always did think we were a race of lunatics. After to-day's exhibition the brothers Wong must be convinced of it."

Fee Wong's head appeared. He, too, was smiling. "Velly good," said he.

CHAPTER XIV

MORE SHOCKS

LATER in the day the weather improved considerably, although Ah Wong was insistent that the rain

would soon start again. They had some food, a wash, and a rest, after which they all felt better, particularly as a closer examination of the

barge's petrol tank promised enough fuel to enable the Cayman to get to its base—always assuming that the engines would continue to work on ordinary commercial petrol instead of the aviation spirit to which they were accustomed.

As it happened they were never put to the test, for just as the work of transferring the fuel was to begin, the roar of a low-flying aircraft sent the airmen ducking for cover. A few seconds later a Japanese seaplane, which Biggles identified as a Kawinishi reconnaissance biplane, came tearing up the river at a height of not more than a hundred feet.

Ginger, peering up from the tarpaulin beneath which he had taken cover, could see the observer in the back seat quite clearly. He was looking over first one side and then the other.

"He's looking for barges, I'll warrant," declared Biggles. "Keep out of sight."

For a little while it looked as if the barge and its adjacent aircraft would escape observation, for they were off the main river and had some protection from the trees ; but when the seaplane zoomed, turned and came back on a course that would bring it immediately over the two craft, Biggles knew that they had been spotted.

"Don't move, anyone," he ordered tersely. "We still have a chance if they think we are just hulks. By the time they can send a launch to look us over we shall be on our way—I hope."

On this occasion Biggles was at fault, as Algy was quick to point out. "Never mind about calling up a launch ; the blighters are going to land and have a look at us," he observed.

•"Somehow I didn't think they'd risk a landing if they were doing a general reconnaissance of the river," returned Biggles.

"It would suit us fine if they would land," put in Ginger quickly. "The petrol in their tank would be better for us than the low-octane stuff in the barge."

•"You're right," flashed Biggles. "I didn't think of that. I've got such an infernal headache that I'm a bit slow off the mark."

"I fancy I could bring them down," suggested Ginger.

"How ? "

"Shall I try it ? "

"Go ahead—but don't get us shot up."

Ginger dived into the cabin. In a minute he was out again, wearing a Japanese tunic and cap selected from the garments that had been abandoned. He ran along the catwalk waving to the now circling aircraft. The machine banked steeply and then, after going down the river for a short distance, came back with its engine idling, obviously intending to land.

"Here they come," said Biggles. "Let them come right in. Don't move."

The Kawinishi made a successful landing, and without stopping, taxied on into the creek made by the runaway

barge. With its engine ticking over, it forged on slowly until one of its floats touched the barge. The lower wing projected well over it.

The pilot pushed back his cockpit cover and sat up. The observer did more. He stood up and called something to Ginger—in his own language, of course. For obvious reasons Ginger did not answer. All he could think to do was make signs with his hands and point to the cabin, which he then entered, for he was afraid the Japanese might notice that his face was white. If the enemy airmen thought this strange behaviour they gave no sign of it. The observer climbed out on his wing, walked along it, and dropped lightly on the barge within two yards of where Biggles was crouching under the tarpaulin.

Biggles rose up and knocked him into the water—not a difficult matter since the Jap was unprepared for such a swift assault. "Take care of him ! " shouted Biggles, and jumping on the plane, ran to the cockpit. The pilot was so taken aback that he scarcely moved. At the last moment he dropped in his seat and tried to close the cover. Biggles clapped a revolver to his head. The Jap stared at him, saucer-eyed ; then he raised his hands. Algy was dragging the observer back on the barge. The whole thing was over in less than a minute.

Biggles made signs to the pilot to get on the barge. The man did not protest. No doubt he realized that with three white men and two Chinese to deal with, resistance was futile.

Biggles escorted them both to the cabin and closed the hatch on them. Ginger smiled.

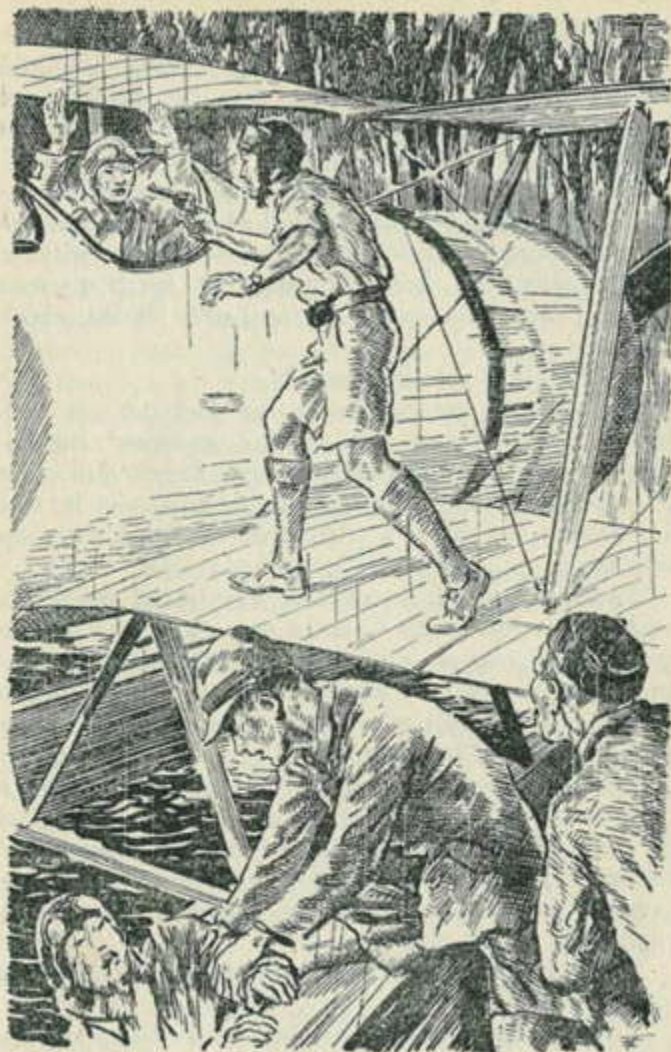
The capture had been ridiculously easy, and more in the nature of comedy than tragedy.

"That's fine," declared Biggles. "Let's fill up and get ready to go home."

"You mean—right away ? " queried Ginger.

Biggles thought for a moment, holding his head in his hands. Ginger noticed that his cheeks were flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright, but he said nothing.

"I don't think we'd better risk flying out of Malaya in daylight," decided Biggles. "There are bound to be enemy machines about, and it would be silly to risk bumping into them."



Biggles clapped a revolver to his head.

It would be better to wait for dark, and aim to arrive at Lucky Strike about dawn."

What about the prisoners ? "

"I'm not going to clutter the Cayman up with them, if that's what you mean," answered Biggles. "We'll set fire to the barge because there's still a lot of rubber in it. The prisoners can sit in the Kawinishi. No

doubt a patrol boat will pick them up later on."

The business of transferring the petrol from the Japanese aircraft to the Cayman was a long and tedious one. There was no pipe long enough to syphon the spirit from one tank to another, so it had to be carried in cans. As a result of this it was nearly dark by the time the task had been completed.

After that there was nothing to do but wait, although a watchful eye was kept on the sky for a recurrence of the rain. Should it show signs of starting, Biggles had decided to take off immediately, for to take off from the river in a monsoon downpour would be practically impossible.

The rain held off, and they finished their iron rations.

"It's getting on for midnight," said Biggles at last. "I think we'll get along." He had a few words with Fee Wong to confirm that the brothers wished to leave Malaya, for after what had happened they had already hinted at this. There was, they decided, no reason for staying.

With Ah Wong acting as interpreter, the two prisoners were made to get into their machine and paddle it some distance away. The barge was then fired. In some haste Biggles and the others boarded the Cayman ; the engines were started, and in the lurid glare of the burning barge the aircraft tore down the stream in a wild take-off. Having the advantage of being lightly loaded, it soon left the water, but it narrowly missed the tree-tops as it zoomed in a manner not in the least like Biggles's usual practice. Ginger, who was in the next seat, glanced at him, and saw at once that something was wrong. Biggles was sagging forward, as though he was falling asleep. Ginger grabbed him by the arm.

" Hi ! What's the matter ? " he asked sharply. Biggles lolled back. "Can't see," he muttered in a weak voice.

Ginger grabbed the control column and yelled for Algy. Algy appeared.

" Biggles is ill. Get him into the cabin ! shouted Ginger in a panic, for in spite of his efforts to keep the machine on even keel, it was rocking dangerously.

Somehow Algy managed to get Biggles out of the pilot's seat and Ginger slipped into his place. For a few minutes, while he was alone,

he was content to keep the machine on its course. Then Algy came back.

"Looks to me as if he's got a sharp attack of fever," he announced. "I've seen it coming on for the past twenty-four hours."

"I noticed it too," answered Ginger.

"It may not last long, but he's in no state to fly," went on Algy. "We've made him as comfortable as possible on the floor. The sooner he's on the ground between blankets the better."

"You'd better take over."

Algy took the control seat and Ginger sat beside him, although from time to time he went back into the cabin to see how Biggles was faring. He was conscious, but was obviously running a high temperature.

"Why didn't you say you were sick ? " accused Ginger. "You nearly crashed the lot of us."

Biggles smiled weakly. "I didn't realize how sick I was until we were in the air ; then it came on sort of sudden."

"Well, don't worry. Everything's all right. We're all set for home and ought to be there about sun-up. Try to get some sleep." With that Ginger went back to Algy.

"He isn't too bad," he said. "I think the bout will soon pass—you know how it is with malaria."

"What I'm worried about is what we are going to do with him when we get to Lucky Strike," muttered Algy. "He ought to go down to Australia for a course of treatment, but of course he won't—at any rate, not until our work is finished."

"Let's get to Lucky Strike for a start," suggested Ginger practically. "Where are we now

? "

"We've just left the coast. If the weather keeps fair we shouldn't have any trouble."

Ginger looked at the sky, and was relieved to see that although it was

partly covered, there were gaps through which the stars gleamed brightly. There was no sign of enemy aircraft and the Cayman roared on through the night. Sometimes he dozed, for he was desperately tired, and sometimes he took over from Algy to give him a chance to rest. In this way the hours passed, with the aircraft ploughing its invisible furrow across the tropic sky.

After a long silence Ginger spoke. "Six o'clock," he observed. "It should start getting light any minute now. The old Cayman has hung together pretty well considering the rough handling she's had."

Algy nodded. "That's Borneo ahead," he remarked, and a few minutes later, as the first faint streaks of dawn stained the eastern horizon, the aircraft roared high over the rugged coast on the last lap of its journey. Slowly the world opened tired eyes for another day.

Ginger, half asleep, stared ahead at nothing in particular. He was looking forward to a long unbroken sleep. Suddenly he started, blinked, stared, closed his eyes and stared again.

"I say ! What's going on ? " he cried.

Algy, who was flying mechanically, peered forward.

Ginger saw the smoke first. The high ground on which Lucky Strike was situated was smoking like a volcano in eruption. As a matter of detail, he had seen the smoke for some time, but in an abstract sort of way had taken it for cloud blowing up over the horizon.

There was no longer room for doubt. It was smoke.

"The forest is on fire," he jerked out.

"Don't you believe it," returned Algy crisply. "The forest is soaking wet. I can't imagine it burning." Then he gasped. "Look up ! It's bombs."

Lifting his eyes, Ginger saw for the first time a number of minute specks circling over the landing-ground. He counted twelve.

"What do you make of that lot ? " asked Algy tersely.

"Don't know—they're too far off," replied Ginger.

"They're Japs, of course. They must have found the aerodrome, and they're plastering it."

" Ah-huh. I suppose we can thank that fighter that came down to look

at us, and then pushed off home."

" Shall I tell Biggles ? "

"No," decided Algy. "It's no use worrying him. We shall have to work this out ourselves.

One thing is certain. It's no use trying to get in while the raid is on. Nor dare we risk being seen."

Before he had finished speaking, Algy had turned the aircraft and was racing nose down for a bank of cloud that was rolling up from the south. Not until he had taken cover behind it did he speak again.

"Good thing we had a margin of petrol," he said grimly.

"How much have you got left ? "

"About half an hour. The Japs should have gone by then."

"They seemed to be doing as they jolly well liked. Why weren't the Beaus up after them, I wonder ? "

Algy shrugged his shoulders. "We may find out presently. This looks to me like a pretty sticky mess."

Biggles's face appeared at the door of the bulkhead that divided the cockpit from the cabin. "What game do you two think you're playing at ? " he demanded. "I may be sick, but I'm not so ill that I can't tell when a machine is off its course."

"The Japs are bombing Lucky Strike," answered Algy calmly. "I'm hanging about until they pack up." "How many machines could you see ? "

"I counted a dozen."

Biggles groaned. "Trust things to come unstuck the moment I turn my back."

"You'd better go and lie down," suggested Algy. "You can't do anything."

For twenty minutes by the watch Algy cruised up and down near the cloud, ready to bolt into it should hostile machines appear. Then he edged cautiously along the rim of the cloud towards the aerodrome. A

quick reconnaissance of the sky revealed that the enemy aircraft had gone. As soon as he realized it, Algy put his nose down for the landingground, from which a sluggish column of smoke was still rising.

As the aircraft drew near Ginger gave a sudden cry. "Look at the ground ! " he muttered.

Explanation was unnecessary. The landing-ground was pitted with craters, any one of which would be sufficient to wreck an aircraft that tried to land on it.

"Looks like we're sunk," went on Ginger. "What are you going to do ? We've no juice to go anywhere else even if we wanted to. It's either the aerodrome or the forest."

"Better tell Biggles the position."

Ginger went through to the cabin and told Biggles how matters stood.

"Anyone on the aerodrome ? " asked Biggles.

"Not a soul. They must have taken cover when the dirt started dropping. In any case, we haven't enough petrol to hang about while they fill in the craters."

"Then there's nothing to argue about," declared Biggles. "It means a crash landing. Tell Algy to get on with it. I'd take her in myself, but it's no use pretending ; I'm in no state to judge distance, and should probably hit the trees. Go ahead. Algy knows what to do."

Ginger went back to the cockpit. " Biggles says put her down as best you can," he told Algy briefly.

Algy did not answer. With his eyes on the bomb-torn landing-ground, he started gliding down, his left hand on the switch ready to cut the ignition the moment before the 'impact, to reduce the risk of fire. A number of figures could now be seen standing on the edge of the aerodrome. There were also three burnt-out crashes ; one, of course, was that of the ill-fated Japanese flying-boat that had tried to land, but whether the other two were British or Japanese there was no means of knowing.

Algy glided in slowly over the tree-tops. There were, of course, open spaces between the craters, but no area large enough to offer a full length runway. The big machine continued to lose height. Algy

switched off and lowered his wheels, hoping they would absorb some of the shock of impact before they were wiped off, as it seemed certain they would be. Ginger braced himself. The wheels touched, with a clear run of perhaps forty yards to the first crater. The machine settled down, still travelling at high speed. Algy pressed his left foot on the rudder-bar. The machine vibrated horribly as it swerved, but it missed the crater and rushed on to the next. Algy repeated the performance, but the next crater was too close, and the swerve of necessity more acute. The undercarriage crumpled under the strain. The keel struck the ground with a crash ; shuddering, the machine skidded towards the next crater ; it mounted the pile of detritus that surrounded the yawning hole, and then, with another crash, it stopped. Both Algy and Ginger were flung forward, but not with sufficient force to cause injury.

The moment the machine came to rest they scrambled through into the cabin. The door was already opened, and Biggles was urging the two Chinese to get out. With the dread of fire ever present in his mind, no one moves faster than an airman leaving a crash. In a few seconds the whole party was outside, and had placed a safe distance between it and the wreck.

"Good work, Algy," said Biggles. "You haven't made as big a mess as I expected."

People came running from the occupied end of the aerodrome.

"What you might call a spectacular homecoming," said Biggles weakly.

"But we are at least home," observed Ginger philosophically.

CHAPTER XV

DISASTER AT LUCKY STRIKE

BIGGLES, shivering in spite of a pile of blankets, lay in bed and listened to the tale of woe that the home-base party had to tell. The others stood around. This, briefly, was the story.

The first indication of trouble came within an hour of the Cayman leaving for Malaya, when Suba's medicine-men had picked up a drum message that was being tapped across the island. This announced that Japanese transports were arriving at Brunei, on the coast of British North Borneo. This was followed by another message saying that many aeroplanes were landing on the aerodrome. Shortly before dawn yet another message said that Japanese troops were advancing

through the bamboo belt towards the heart of the island. They were under the command of a general named Yashnowada. Upon receipt of this disturbing information those at Lucky

Strike, realizing that the landing-ground must be the objective for which the troops were making, started to put the place in a state of defence. It was decided that, as soon as it was light, one of the Beaufighters should take off to try to locate the Japs, and if possible hamper their advance. Before the machine could take off, however, there had come the first of three air raids, which proved conclusively that the position of the aerodrome was known to the enemy.

The first raid had occurred when, without warning, no fewer than eighteen Japanese bombers appeared over the aerodrome. At the time one of the Beaufighters was having some adjustments made, so it was not airworthy. The other two had taken off, and, flown by Bertie and Tug, had shot down three of the raiders. Two had fallen in the forest, the other one on the aerodrome. Rex had taken Suba and the natives away from the aerodrome as soon as the enemy machines appeared, so there had been no casualties ; but damage had been done to the village, also to some of the store-huts. Unfortunately, the grounded Beaufighter had received a direct hit, and was blown to pieces. After the raiders had withdrawn the two Beaufighters had managed to land, in spite of bomb craters. One had suffered minor damage in combat and was being repaired when a second raid, this time by twelve machines, had occurred. Bertie had gone up in the one serviceable fighter, but after shooting down two of the raiders, one of which had crashed on the landing-ground, his machine had been set on fire. He had baled out and had made a safe landing at no great distance from the bases. The Beau-fighter was a total wreck.

This left only one aircraft, the machine that had been under repair at the time of the second raid. All hands had been set to work to fill in the craters, but it was a long task, and work was still going on when the third raid had taken place. This was the attack that Algy and Ginger had seen from the air. In it, the last Beaufighter had been set on fire and destroyed.

"Where was the Liberator all this time ? " asked Biggles at this stage of the story.

Bertie broke the sad news that the Liberator had not come back from Australia. They had been expecting it every minute, but it had not come—which was just as well, asserted Bertie, or it would certainly have been destroyed. Nothing was known of it.

"Which means," said Biggles grimly, "that we haven't a single machine here ? "

"I'm afraid that's about it, old warrior," admitted Bertie sadly.

"I can't understand why you didn't have serious casualties, particularly amongst the natives."

Rex admitted that the native village had been pretty badly knocked about, but Suba didn't mind because new houses could easily be built. The absence of casualties was explained by the fact that there were caves running under the hill, although the existence of these was unknown to the white men until the raid had started, when the natives had fled to them.

"I think that's about all," concluded Bertie.

"It's enough to go on with, too," replied Biggles sarcastically. "I would go and get a dose of fever at a time like this," he added bitterly.

"What with Japanese troops coming through the jungle, and air raids, it begins to look as if Lucky Strike is about washed up," put in Rex.

"It may look that way to you," answered Biggles coldly. "Things aren't going to be easy, I must admit, but if this little yellow swine Yashnowada thinks he's going to knock us out—and that is evidently his intention

—he's got another think coming. We must get a move on. Rex, you handle the natives ; set them to work filling in the bomb holes in case the Liberator turns up. Don't let the men work haphazard ; try to make a clear runway—we can mark it out with smudge fires if the Liberator comes. With or without it, we've got to get in touch with Australia to get some replacements. With some fighters, I still think we could hold this place indefinitely

; without them—well, as soon as the Japs realize that there's no opposition they'll come in at low level and blast the place off the face of the earth. We can expect them back pretty soon, anyway. Some of you go and look at the Cayman to see if there is any hope of getting it into the air. Rex, ask Suba to listen for drum messages that might give us the position of enemy troops. Tell the natives to make for the caves if there's another raid ; our lads had better shift all the stores into them. Get on with it."

Ginger went outside with Algy. "Oh, for a bunch of Spitfires ! " he

moaned. "With these bombers coming over here without escort we could give them the shock of their lives."

Algy nodded. "A nice thought, but we haven't any fighters and we don't look like getting any," he said quietly. "It's no use kidding ourselves ; things are pretty serious. If the Liberator doesn't come back, and the Cayman turns out to be completely cheesed, we might as well start walking. Let's go and look at her."

They walked over to the Cayman and found Flight Sergeant Smyth already there.

"What do you make of her, Flight Sergeant ? " asked Algy.

"I Won't say she'll never fly again, sir, but fixed as we are I wouldn't give much for her chance. The worst trouble is the undercarriage and a twisted airscrew. There's a hole in the hull, but that wouldn't matter unless a landing was made on water."

Algy nodded moodily. "Well, you'd better see what you can do with her. We'll give a hand. For a start we'd better try to get her under the trees, or the Japs, if they come again, will scatter the pieces all over the aerodrome."

The ground staff and most of the officers worked on the machine until noon, by which time the natives, under Rex's supervision, had filled in sufficient craters to form a fairly safe runway. A supply of poles had been cut to use as rollers, to get the machine to the trees.

Ginger was snatching a mouthful of lunch when the distant hum of an aero engine sent him dashing outside, although a cheer from the mechanics gave him a clue to the truth.

The Liberator was coming in, and men raced to light small fires to mark the runway.

Knowing how much depended on it, Ginger held his breath while the machine landed, and gasped his relief when it ran in without mishap. He went to meet it as it taxied in.

Angus looked down at him, his eyes wide with concern, for he had, of course, seen the bomb craters.

"Get a move on ! " yelled Ginger. "What have you brought ? "

"Petrol and oil," answered Angus. "What's been happening here ? "

"Get down and I'll tell you," answered Ginger.

In a few minutes the Liberator was the centre of furious activity as the oil and petrol drums were rolled out.

Biggles appeared, his face still flushed with the fever. "Ginger, get that machine refuelled as quickly as you can," he ordered tersely. "Then get her under the trees out of sight until I decide who's to go to Australia."

Ginger waited only long enough to hear the cause of the delay in the Liberator's return.

There was nothing remarkable about it. The machine had been damaged by enemy fighters which it had encountered near the Australian coast, and Angus had decided to get the repairs effected at Darwin. These had taken two days.

Ginger returned to the Liberator. He waited until the work of refuelling was complete, and then climbed into the cockpit to taxi the machine out of sight under its partly destroyed bough-shelter. Having started the engines, he was about to move forward when he noticed that the mechanics, who were still standing by the machine, were all staring into the sky. He guessed what was coming even as he pushed open the side window and shouted, "What is it ? "

" Enemy bombers, sir," called the flight sergeant. "Twelve of them—coming in low."

Now in moments of great peril the human brain is capable of its best efforts. Under the urge of self-preservation it co-ordinates itself with nerve and muscle to a remarkable degree. Thus was it at this moment with Ginger. Action was practically simultaneous with thought, and his movements were swift. He realized that if the bombers were in view of the airmen on the ground, the aerodrome must be in view of the enemy pilots, in which case they must already have seen the Liberator. Clearly, there was no longer any point in trying to get it under the trees. Even if it had not been seen it was impossible that the aircraft could escape damage from the bombs that would soon be falling—and the Liberator was the last possible link with Australia. If it were destroyed, no matter how hard Biggles. worked, the squadron would be rendered noneffective, to say the least of it. Obviously, the thing to do was to get it out of the target area.

Even while these thoughts crowded through Ginger's brain he was roaring round into the runway. He had a fleeting vision through a side window of the airmen racing for cover, and of Bertie gesticulating

frantically as he pointed to the sky ; then, with his teeth clenched, he was tearing along the runway. He couldn't see the enemy machines ; nor did he try ; he was much too occupied with what he was doing.

The first bombs fell before he was off the ground. He did not hear them coming, but he heard the roar of the explosions and felt the blast hit the machine. It was only by sheer strength that he kept it on the runway. The instant his wheels were off the ground he banked steeply, and missing the tree-tops by a matter of a few feet, he raced away over the forest. Not until he had got the aircraft on even keel did he try to see the enemy bombers, but they were behind him, so he was unable to see anything of them. By turning slightly he could see bombs falling on the aerodrome, so he roared on, not caring much about direction, but concerned only with getting out of the danger zone.

Nothing happened. If the enemy bombers pursued him, which he did not think likely, he was unaware of it. Presently he began to think more clearly. The first point that struck him was, that it would be no use going back to the aerodrome—at least not unless he was prepared to circle for hours while the inevitable craters were filled in. And if he was going to be in the air for hours he might as well try to do something useful. It was then that the idea of trying to reach Australia first struck him. If he could get to Darwin the authorities might release some delivery pilots to take new Beau-fighters out—or fighters of some sort. Yes, he decided, that was the thing to do. If he could get some machines to Lucky Strike the whole position would be changed.

The aerodrome could be defended, and even though the bombers continued to come over, the squadron could take heavy toll of them, and carry on as a thorn in the side of the enemy's lines of communication, as Malta was doing in the Mediterranean.

The prospect thrilled him, and he reached eagerly for Angus's maps, still reposing in their locker. He had only one fear. The Japs had seen him go. They would guess that he was making for Australia because there was no British landing-ground nearer. Yashnowada, as soon as he received their report, would radio to every squadron in Java and other islands to cut him off. By night it would be an easy matter to dodge them, but in broad daylight it would not be so easy, and several hours must elapse before night fell. If he were intercepted, with his gun turrets unmanned, he would need more than skill to escape, so with the map on his knees he began climbing steeply for height as the first obvious precaution. At the same time he settled down to watch the sky as far as his limited field of view permitted.

Half an hour passed and found him, as far as he could make out, alone in the sky, on a straight course for Darwin at an altitude of twenty thousand feet. He had a long flight ahead of him, and he did not want to use the oxygen apparatus unless it became necessary. Once, out of curiosity, he donned the radio headphones ; he picked up several messages, but they were, he supposed, in Japanese ; at any rate, there was nothing in English, so he put the phones back on their peg.

Presently it struck him that every plane looking for the Liberator would patrol on a direct course between Borneo and Darwin, so he edged a little to the west, hoping in this way to dodge them, although the new course would take him over Java.

One o'clock found him over the Java Sea, with the long blue shape of the island filling the southern horizon. He knew that he was bound to fly over it, or another of the Japanese occupied islands, which now stretched for thousands of miles from the northern tip of Sumatra to New Guinea. The gaps between them were negligible and hardly worth bothering about, so he decided to fly straight on. Anxiously, now, he watched the sky ahead, for he had apparently passed over the area affected by the monsoon, and the sky in front of him was clear turquoise blue. Once he saw a formation in the distance, but it was far below him ; watching the machines, he edged away ; the formation held on its course, and eventually disappeared in the west.

By two o'clock the southern coast of Java was fading astern, and by three he was far out over the Indian Ocean. There were no more islands. The ocean, a lonely, limitless expanse of unruffled blue, lay before him. He was safe. At any rate he considered that the chance of encountering hostile aircraft was now remote.

Hardly had the thought passed through his mind when far ahead on his line of flight he saw a flash. It was gone in an instant, but he knew that the spark of light could have been caused by one thing only—an aeroplane, banking. Who could be flying a plane in such a place, and why, he could not imagine. Watching the spot closely, for there was as yet no sign of an aircraft, he turned a little to the east to give it a wide berth. For five minutes he stared at the spot fixedly, but when the plane still did not appear he drew a deep breath of relief and turned his eyes ahead. His whole body stiffened when, a bare two miles away, he saw a plane at his own height. From the way it grew more distinct he knew that it was standing towards him, which meant

that the pilot had seen him. Looking at the aircraft head-on he could not recognize the type, but whatever it was he had no desire to meet

it, so he decided to try to outclimb it, as his best chance of escape.

So concerned was he with avoiding hostile aircraft that it did not occur to him that the machine might be friendly, so his relief when, a moment later, he recognized a Fairey Fulmar was so great that he laughed aloud. A second Fulmar appeared, cutting across his bows, and he regarded them with no small curiosity. Then, suddenly, he guessed the answer to the problem of their unexpected appearance. The Fulmar was a two-seater fleet-fighter, which could only mean that an aircraft carrier was in the vicinity, for the Fulmars were too far from land to belong to a shore-based unit. One of the Fulmars came so close that he could see the pilot staring at him. He could not understand the interest. It seemed natural that as soon as the pilots identified the Liberator they would go their ways ; but it was soon clear that they had no such intention. Far from that, one of the gunners fired a burst of tracer across his nose. The pilot held up his hand in a signal that could not be misunderstood. It was an order to follow. Ginger noticed that he was wearing headphones, so he made haste to don his own. A minute later a voice was speaking in his ears : "Come along, Liberator, we want to look at you . . . Can you hear me, Liberator ? . . ."

Ginger raised a hand to show that he understood, and turned obediently to follow. He was annoyed at the interruption because he was in a hurry to get to Australia, but he was in no condition to start an argument with one Fulmar, let alone two. The fleet-fighters took up positions on either side of him, and shepherded him like well-trained collies.

Ten minutes later the aircraft carrier came into view

on the southern horizon, and in another quarter of an hour Ginger was circling over it. He was not at all pleased at the prospect of having to put the big machine down on a steel deck, but there was nothing else for it, so he went in and made a reasonably good landing. His brakes soon brought him to a standstill. Airmen in dark blue uniforms ran out. Among them was an officer whom he took to be the duty officer.

Ginger climbed down. "What's the idea ? " he asked in a voice that was by no means friendly. He still resented the waste of time.

The officer grinned. "We just wanted to look you over."

"Haven't you seen a Liberator before ? "

"Plenty, but the pilots were not always white." Ginger frowned. He

began to understand.

"Do you mean that the Japs fly Liberators ? "

The officer nodded. "Yes. They captured one or two in the Philippines." A puzzled look came over the officer's face. "You're not alone in that kite, are you ? "

" I am."

The officer's frown grew deeper. "That's a bit unusual, isn't it ? "

"Yes, I suppose it is, but my squadron is an unusual squadron, and at the moment circumstances are even more unusual."

The officer continued to look puzzled. It was plain that he was suspicious of a Liberator that operated over the Indian Ocean without a crew. "I think you had better come and have a word with the Old Man," he suggested.

"Do you mind if I ask what ship this is ? " inquired Ginger.

"Adelaide—Royal Australian Navy."

Ginger followed the officer to the bridge, where he

came face to face with an elderly, genial-looking, broad-shouldered man in captain's uniform.

Ginger saluted. "Flying Officer Hebblethwaite, sir, Royal Air Force," he announced.

"Captain Garnet. Sorry to pull you in, Mr. Hebblethwaite, but we can't afford to take chances. This is a queer place, and a queer time for you to be here, isn't it ? Queer idea, flying solo, too."

"I think I had better explain, sir," said Ginger. "Yes, I think you had," answered Captain Garnet. Ginger told his story.

CHAPTER XVI

GINGER GOES BACK

BIGGLES was worried. He had watched the Liberator's frenzied take-off with mixed feelings, for

while he realized the purpose behind Ginger's action, he doubted his ability to run the gauntlet, solo, to Australia—assuming that that was his intention. Moreover, he had hoped to use the Liberator to take detailed despatches to Australia, explaining his position and asking for instructions. The aircraft was his only connecting link. Now it had gone.

There had been no time to ponder on this upsetting development at the moment. The enemy bombers had occupied his attention. For the first time they had come in at low level and there was no way of stopping them. In the circumstances the only thing Biggles could do was to take cover in the caves with the rest and so avoid casualties. Most of the stores, and the fuel brought by the Liberator, had already been carried in, which was, as Algy remarked, something to be thankful for. So the squadron, as well as the natives, sat under the hill while the ground quivered under the assault of high-explosive bombs. To have to sit and take it was a new experience for most of the members of Biggles's squadron, and there were glum faces as the bombardment proceeded without interruption.

"Good thing Ginger got off," remarked Algy. "If he hadn't, by this time there would have been nothing left of the Liberator but splinters."

Biggles nodded. "Yes. I was a bit peeved when I saw him go, but taking all the circumstances into consideration I think he did the right thing."

"How's the fever ? "

"Better, thanks—probably because with all this going on I haven't had time to think about it."

"Ginger may come back when the raid is over."

Biggles looked doubtful. "I don't think so. He'll have the sense to realize that it will be hours before we can fill in the craters."

"Do you think we shall be able to hang on here ? "

"With some fighters we could soon put an end to this bombing—or at any rate make it a costly business."

"The Japs seem mighty anxious to wipe us out," remarked Algy.

"Naturally. They're concentrating at Brunei. The next jump on the way to Australia is Surabaya, in Java. We're sitting right across their line of

communication."

"What about these troops which the drums say are trying to reach us through the forest ? "

Biggles called Rex and put the question to him.

"I don't think they'll do it," said Rex. "At least, it wouldn't take much to stop them. I know these jungles. What with heat, and fever, and snake-bite, and shortage of food, and all the rest of the things that can happen to a party in this sort of country, I'll wager half of them are non-effective already. With Suba and his boys pushing poisoned darts into them they'd soon get fed up. If we could bomb them, or attack them from the air at the same time, they wouldn't stand an earthly of getting through. They must still be some days' march away."

"Do you think Suba would try to hold them if we asked him ? "

"I'm sure of it. These fellows live for fighting. Now that the country is being invaded the other tribes might chip in."

"Could Suba get in touch with them ? "

"Of course—by drum talk. If he suggested a truce with his old enemies while they all set about the invader, every tribe on the island might fall in line—particularly as there would be some head-collecting in prospect."

"You might suggest that to him."

"I will," promised Rex.

Biggles went to the mouth of the cave and listened. "The blitz seems to be over," he said.

"Let's go and have a look round."

The Japs had done their work well, although there was very little material damage for the simple reason that, apart from empty huts, there was little to damage. There were fewer holes in the aerodrome than Biggles expected, except round the Cayman, which was now a complete wreck. It seemed that the enemy bombers had concentrated on the trees fringing the landing-ground; doubtless supposing that stores, and possibly aircraft, would be concealed under them. With fallen trees lying everywhere, the fringe of the forest looked as if it had been struck by a tornado, although as far as any useful military

purpose was concerned this was really a waste of high explosive.

"All right, get busy everybody," ordered Biggles. "We'll show them that we can fill in holes faster than they can make 'em. The Liberator will come back sometime—I hope.

Flight Sergeant, get the remains of the Cayman cleared away—no, just a minute.

Assemble the bits and pieces at the top end of the aerodrome. We never use that end.

From the air the machine will look like a serviceable aircraft, so it should give the Japs something to aim at. Maybe they'll leave this end alone. Rex, see what sort of force Suba is willing to muster to attack the Japs in the forest. By using relays of runners he might keep us in touch with their position, and that would be worth knowing." Biggles took a stiff dose of quinine. "Thank goodness this fever is passing." He smiled. "We've probably established a new record."

Algy looked surprised. "For what ? "

"For being the only squadron in the Royal Air Force without an aircraft of any sort."

There were no more raids that day. By nightfall the bomb craters had been filled in and the surplus rock carried away, so that the aerodrome once more presented a fair surface.

The splinter-torn wings and fuselage of the Cayman had been dragged to the unoccupied end of the landing - ground and roughly assembled to look like a serviceable machine, which, it was hoped, would attract the attention of the bombaimers if there came another raid. Suba's drums were muttering. Far away other drums could be heard answering.

"Ginger hasn't come back, so he must have gone on

to Australia," remarked Biggles, as they sat down to a meal of bully beef, rice and biscuits. "Everything now depends on whether he got through or not. The earliest we can expect him back is to-morrow evening. I advise everyone to turn in early, because we shall probably have another busy day, bomb-dodging and filling in craters."

Rex appeared. " Suba is fiat out to have a crack at the Japs," he announced. "He's selecting two hundred of his best warriors. I'm going

with him. We aim to start just before dawn. He says the whole island is buzzing with drum talk. From what I can gather, the tribes are taking a new interest now they know that white men are here to help them smite the Japs."

"That's fine," said Biggles. "If you can locate the enemy you might let me have a message, and put up smoke signals to show us where they are, in case we get reinforcements."

This Rex promised to do, and soon afterwards, as there was nothing more to be done, the squadron and its strange mixture of guests settled down for the night in improvised huts that Suba's people had built for them.

The following morning Biggles, looking much fitter, was on the move while the stars still showed through the gaps in the clouds that heralded the rainy season. He saw Rex move off with Suba and his warriors, hideous in warpaint, and as the sky turned grey he was on his way to the airmen's quarters to see Flight Sergeant Smyth when his ears caught the distant hum of aero engines. For a minute or two he hoped that it might be the Liberator ; but then, when he detected the drone of many engines, he knew that the enemy bombers were on their way to finish their work of destruction.

Quick blasts from the Flight Sergeant's whistle warned the sleeping camp of the impending raid, and in a few seconds the occupied end of the aerodrome was buzzing with activity.

"Everybody get to the caves ! " shouted Biggles. "There's no sense in taking chances and there's nothing we can do. Jackson, go and make sure the natives are taking cover."

There was a general move in the direction of the caves. Biggles went with the rest, but when he was nearing them he stopped to count the enemy aircraft. Algy, Bertie and some of the officers waited with him.

"Eighteen of the blighters," muttered Bertie, gazing up at the western sky through his monocle.

"Flying at five thousand, for a guess," murmured Algy.

"I'd give a dooced lot of money—if I had any—for one little Spitfiring-piece," sighed Bertie.

Biggles's face wore a curious expression as he stared in turn at all points of the compass.

"They seem to be making a lot of noise," he remarked. "The noise seems to be all round us, too, as if there was more than one formation."

"There is ! " cried Algy suddenly. "They've brought an escort. Look ! " He pointed to the south, where a cluster of specks, considerably higher than the bombers, were strung out in a long V-formation. There are another twelve machines in that lot," added Algy, looking puzzled.

"It's usual for an escort to come from the same direction as the machines it is guarding,"

observed Biggles. "That's no escort. Judging from the way they are diving I'd say—if I didn't know it was impossible--that those twelve machines were going to have a crack at the bombers . . . Just a minute!" Biggles's voice rose sharply. "They're Faireys.

You can't mistake the cut of the tail unit. Yes, by all that's miraculous, they're Fulmars 1

" Biggles's voice ended in a yell of exultation.

"How about bobbing into the jolly old caves ? " suggested Bertie. "The beastly bombers are getting close—too jolly close—yes, by Jove."

"Not me," returned Biggles. "I'm going to watch this—and believe me, it's going to be worth watching."

Those who had gone into the caves now came running out to watch what promised to be an air battle to remember. There seemed to be little risk of bombs, for by this time the bomber pilots had seen the fighters now tearing down to intercept them, and what had been a neat formation soon broke up in something that looked very much like panic. One or two of the bombers turned for home ; others made haste to get rid of their now undesirable cargoes, the bombs bursting harmlessly in the forest.

The first casualties occurred when two of the bombers collided before a single shot had been fired. One bomber lost a wing and spun down into the trees ; the other, not so badly damaged, went into a glide ; the crew of four baled out.

"I wouldn't care to be in those fellows' shoes," remarked Algy. " Suba and his boys must be somewhere about the spot where they'll touch down."

Biggles was not particularly interested in the fate of the bomber crew. "What beats me is where these Fulmars have come from," he muttered. "Somehow I feel that Ginger must have had a hand in it, yet I don't see how he could possibly have brought them here. The Liberator isn't with them, anyway."

Nothing more was said, for the fight had now been joined. The result was never in doubt, and there were moments when muttered comments indicated that the British airmen could almost feel sorry for the Japanese, who for the most part behaved as if they had never before been in action.

"The perishers are learning that it's one thing to unload bombs on people who can't hit back, but another kettle of fish when someone else is in the sky to argue about it,"

sneered Tug Carrington, whose parents had been killed in a London raid.

To describe the combat in detail would necessitate wearisome repetition. There was one outstanding incident that brought a gasp from the onlookers. One of the Fulmars, after tearing down in a terrific dive, pulled up vertically under a bomber. For a second, at the top of its zoom, it seemed to be suspended by an invisible cable. Its guns spurted tracer.

Then something fell from the bomber—several things. They were bombs. It was clear to the spectators that the bomb-aimer, either by accident or design, had released his entire load of bombs. They descended in a shower on the Fulmar, which, having for the moment lost flying speed, was sluggish on controls, if not actually out of control. It seemed certain that the British aircraft must be hit ; yet by a miracle it was not, although the entire load of bombs passed within a few feet of it. The danger passed, the Fulmar fell off on one wing, while the bomber, with an engine aflame, went down at a steep angle into the forest. A rising pillar of smoke marked the position of the crash.

" Phew ! " whistled Biggles. "I wouldn't have been in that Fulmar at that moment for all the tea in China. I should like to have seen the pilot's face when he saw what was falling on him. If his hair doesn't turn white

overnight then he must have more nerve than I've got."

Generally speaking, the Fulmars made rings round the bombers. Seven

followed the two that had by collision destroyed themselves. At one moment no fewer than four bombers were falling out of the sky at the same time. The battle became a rout as the enemy planes scattered and made for home. The survivors disappeared from sight with the Fulmars still mauling them. Slowly the drone of engines and the grunting of machine-guns died away. Silence fell.

"That seems to be about all," remarked Biggles. "And we still don't know the answer to the mystery of where the Fulmars came from."

"I think we shall pretty soon," returned Algy, pointing to a single Fulmar that now came streaking back low over the tree-tops.

Those on the ground watched it while it made a complete circuit of the landing - ground, obviously ascertaining if it was safe to land ; then it came gliding in.

The fighter landed, and taxied straight on to the occupied end of the aerodrome. At the last moment it swung round with a flourish and came to rest. The airscrew stopped.

There was a swish as the front cockpit cover was opened. Ginger stood up. His face was wreathed in smiles.

"Good morning, everybody," he called cheerfully. "Is there a bed left anywhere on this station ? Because if there is, I know a bloke who could use it."

Biggles took a pace forward. "Not so fast, my lad. Before you close your little blue eyes I'd like to know how you came to get in a squadron of Fulmars ?

Ginger looked pained. "Get in a squadron. Don't

you believe it I led the squadron." Ginger's face broke into a grin. "What sort of show did I put up ? " There was a titter of mirth.

"Come off your high horse before you fall off," suggested Biggles. "We're all agog to hear how you did it."

Ginger got down. He swayed for a moment on his feet and passed his hand wearily over his face. "My goodness ! I'm tired," he murmured. "Don't worry, though, I'm not going to sleep yet. I've brought a packet of good tidings that should make good listening—as they say at the B.B.C."

CHAPTER XVII

THE END OF YASHNOWADA

WITH a steaming cup of coffee taking some of the lines out of his tired face, Ginger passed on his

glad tidings. He described how he had landed on the aircraft carrier, and was enthusiastic about the reception accorded him when it was learned that he was a member of the squadron that had marooned itself, so to speak, in the heart of enemy territory. It seemed that the Australian pilots knew all about it, this probably being the result of the Liberator'

s previous visits to Darwin.

"They couldn't do enough for me," declared Ginger. "All the same, the skipper, Captain Garnet, looked a bit shaken when I suggested that he might lend us a squadron of Fulmars."

There was a shout of laughter.

"You mean—you had the brass face to suggest that ? " cried Biggles incredulously.

"Why not ? " returned Ginger calmly. "If you don't ask you don't get—at least, that's my experience. Anyway, he got in touch with Australia, where, apparently, they are amused at the idea of this outfit sitting right across the Japanese lines of communication. The answer came back that we were to hang on ; moreover, we were to be given all possible assistance until replacements arrived. Mind you," continued Ginger, "I had a lot of useful information to pass on. The Higher Command was interested to hear about the concentration at Brunei, for instance. They were positively tickled to death about the breaking up of the rubber convoy in Malaya."

"I like your cheek," put in Biggles. "You seem to have collected all the glory and whatnot for yourself."

"Oh no," contradicted Ginger. "I gave you the credit."

"It doesn't matter, anyway—go on."

"Well, the upshot of the whole thing was this. Replacements for the machines we have lost are on the way. I also gather that some big bug is coming here, to get all the dope from you as to the actual position

at Lucky Strike."

"What machines are they sending ? " asked Biggles.

"I don't know—they didn't say. Naturally I

pointed out to Captain Garnet that you blokes were

sitting here under a steady rain of bombs without being able to do a thing about it. It seemed certain that

there would be another raid about dawn, so if he could

lend us his Fulmars for an hour or two it might make

the Japs hold their breath until our new machines

arrived. It would give us a chance, at any rate. Captain Garnet agreed, but the snag was, never having seen Lucky Strike aerodrome, he was doubtful if his boys would be able to find it. I offered to show them the way, whereupon he lent me a Fulmar for my own personal use. Nice of him—wasn't it ? "

"It certainly was," agreed Biggles.

"Well, you saw what happened," resumed Ginger. "We took off at a time which I judged would enable us to arrive here about dawn. As everybody hoped, we found the Japs already here."

"What's happened to the Fulmars ? "

"They've gone back—except the one I flew. The Old Man was firm on that point. After all, he's got a carrier to look after, and he daren't risk flapping about the Indian Ocean with half his fighters here. He said the Fulmars were to come here, do their stuff, and then go back. They've gone. Of course, the Japs don't know that ; they'll think the Fulmars are still here, so they'll think twice before they try another raid. Our new machines should be here any time."

"What about the Liberator ? "

"I told Captain Garnet that we hadn't too much fuel and oil, so he sent it on to Darwin by a spare pilot. In any case, he didn't want his ship cluttered up with a kite that size. I understand the pilot will bring it here when he's loaded up, so you had better be on the lookout for him. I told him we'd put up a smoke signal to show him the place. I thought that wouldn't matter now the Japs know we're here, anyway.

That's about all ; so now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to sleep for about three weeks."

"Don't you want anything to eat ? " asked Biggles.

Ginger grinned. "No, sir. I had enough grub on that carrier to last me quite a long time.

They do themselves very well on carriers—at least, the Aussies do. I thought of you all when I was having ham and eggs—"

A yell of indignation cut off Ginger's story.

"All right, you've done a good job, Ginger ; you'd better get some rest," ordered Biggles.

Ginger staggered to a camp-bed and in a moment was fast asleep.

He had six hours of unbroken rest, and was then awakened by such a roar of aircraft that he tumbled out of bed in affright before he was fully awake. Running out, he found everyone on the edge of the aerodrome in a state of enthusiastic excitement. And the reason was not hard to find. Circling the landing-ground which, almost as a challenge to the enemy, had been made conspicuous by a smoke fire, was a formation of seven machines—a Liberator and six Beaufighters. The Liberator landed first, taxied up to the trees, and then disemplaned so many senior officers that Biggles affected horror. "For the love of Mike ! " he gasped. "They must be going to make this place General Headquarters of the Eastern Command."

Among the officers Ginger recognized Wing-Commander Crane, who had organized the Malayan operation, and the American General Barton. These were not entirely unexpected, but he certainly did not expect to see Air Commodore Raymond, of the Air Ministry, who waved a friendly greeting. The Beaufighters landed in turn, and from them stepped a dozen grinning officers of the Royal Australian Air Force.

"And this was supposed to be a secret aerodrome," sighed Biggles, as he stepped forward to meet the officers. He paused, his head on one side, as from the west there came a long roll as of distant thunder.

"It's all right," said Air Commodore Raymond

brightly. "Now you've been good enough to tell us what is happening

at Brunei, three squadrons of Liberators are unloading some quite big bombs on them. Where can we have a conference ? "

Biggles indicated a palm-thatched hut that had survived the bomb raids. "This is the best I can do,

sir. 11

"Never mind, you'll soon be having something better," said the Air Commodore, as the senior officers moved towards the hut, Biggles with them, leaving the rest of the junior officers to guess the object of the mission.

It was an hour before the staff officers emerged. They went straight to the Liberator and departed, taking the Australian pilots with them. After the big machine had taken off Biggles called his squadron together and addressed them.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about ? " he began. "It won't take long to tell you. The Higher Command is so satisfied with the way we've established ourselves here that they came to look at it with a view to making it a regular station, regardless of the fact that it is no longer secret. I told them that provided an adequate supply of machines and stores could be maintained, there was no reason why the station should not carry on indefinitely. But it won't be as it has been hitherto. The head lads have decided that if the thing is worth doing it's worth doing properly. Engineers are coming out to surface the aerodrome, and Australian troops will soon be coming along to defend it against ground attack. Two- Australian squadrons of fighters and a squadron of bombers are moving in.

In other words, Australia is taking over, which means that we shall be recalled. I understand that in the first place we shall go down to Darwin for a rest—until they think of something else for us to do. In the meantime, until the new equipment arrives, which I gather will be pretty soon, we are to carry on. As you will have noticed, we now have something to carry on with." Biggles pointed to the six Beaufighters. "If the Japs try any more raids they'll find something waiting for them. Personally, after this morning's affair with the Fulmars, I don't think they will. For the moment there is only one urgent job, and that is to give air support to Rex, and make life miserable for the enemy troops who are trying to make their way here on foot. I don't think they'll get here anyway, because the monsoon is in full swing farther north and presently it will start raining here. The rain will turn the forest into a quagmire. Rex promised to let me

know, and put up some smoke signals when he makes contact with the enemy ; but I think it's a bit too early for that, so while we are waiting let's get things ship-shape."

It was not until late that evening that the first native runner arrived from Rex. He brought a written message. From this it was learned that the enemy had made some progress, and had concentrated in a valley the position of which was shown on a sketch-map which was enclosed. Suba's warriors were anxious to attack, but so far they had been restrained, and were watching the enemy from a nearby hill. The place was about thirty miles distant from Lucky Strike.

"This seems to be the moment we've been waiting for," declared Biggles. "If the enemy are in concentration they should make an easy target. We've got half an hour before sunset—just nice time."

The Beaufighters covered the thirty miles to the enemy camp in just six minutes. There was no difficulty in finding it, for the troops, who could not have expected an attack from the air, had cleared an area of bamboo, and had lighted cooking - fires, thus making themselves conspicuous. The six Beaufighters tore down on them with their guns streaming.

Never was a surprise attack more devastating in its instant effect. There was no respite for the Japanese troops, for as the six Browning machine-guns in the wings of each aircraft ceased firing, the guns in the rear power-operated turrets came into action ; and they remained in action until the forward guns were brought to bear again. For five minutes the Beaufighters slashed the Japanese camp with a hail of bullets, and that, Biggles decided, was enough. He knew that Suba and his warriors were about, and could be relied upon to take care of those troops who had bolted into the forest for shelter.

Well satisfied, he turned for home, which was reached just as darkness was closing in.

"I think that will do for to-day," announced Biggles.

It was the last offensive flight made by the members of Biggles's squadron on the island of Borneo, for the following morning the new aircraft began to arrive from Australia, and Biggles handed over to the commanding officer, a Squadron-Leader of the Royal Australian Air Force. In the afternoon the bombers arrived, and with them the transport plane that was to take the members of the departing squadron, and the guests they had collected, to Darwin. Biggles

insisted on awaiting the return of Rex, who had not yet come back from his sortie in the jungle. He thought he might wish to leave the island with him. In this, however, he was mistaken.

During the afternoon a triumphant war-song announced the return of Suba and his warriors. Rex,

mud-splashed from head to foot, arrived with them and Biggles put the question to him.

"Thanks all the same, but I think I'll stay here," decided Rex. "I know the natives and their language, so I can serve the country best by staying on and helping the new squadrons in the same way as I helped you. Besides," he added, " Suba has made me his blood-brother, and I'm getting quite fond of him—although I must confess that I don't approve of some of his habits. Look at him." Rex pointed to where Suba, Kalut and the warriors were dancing round an object that had been impaled on the point of a spear.

"What on earth is it ? " asked Ginger casually, and then fell back, grimacing in horror. "

It's a head," he gasped.

"Yes, and I think I've seen that face before," put in Algy.

"You're right. It's Yashnowada," confirmed Rex. " Suba made a bee-line for him when we attacked the camp after you had shot it up. It's no use pretending to be sorry for Yashnowada. He invited himself here, and he did at least die quickly, which is more than can be said for some of his victims."

"I suppose you're right," agreed Biggles. "All the same, I don't exactly admire your taste in friends ; but then, you've been here for a long time, so you are probably used to this sort of thing." Biggles held out his hand. "Well, good-bye, Rex, and good luck." He turned to the transport plane, the engines of which had been started. "Get aboard, everybody," he ordered. "Let's go and see what Australia looks like."

"After Borneo it should look pretty good," said Jackson as he went aboard.

"Sure, that's not a bad idea," asserted Bill Gray.

"Okay by me," said Pat Flannagan.

Fee Wong helped his brother into the machine. " Velly good," said he.

"Quite a party," observed Biggles, smiling, as he closed the door.

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